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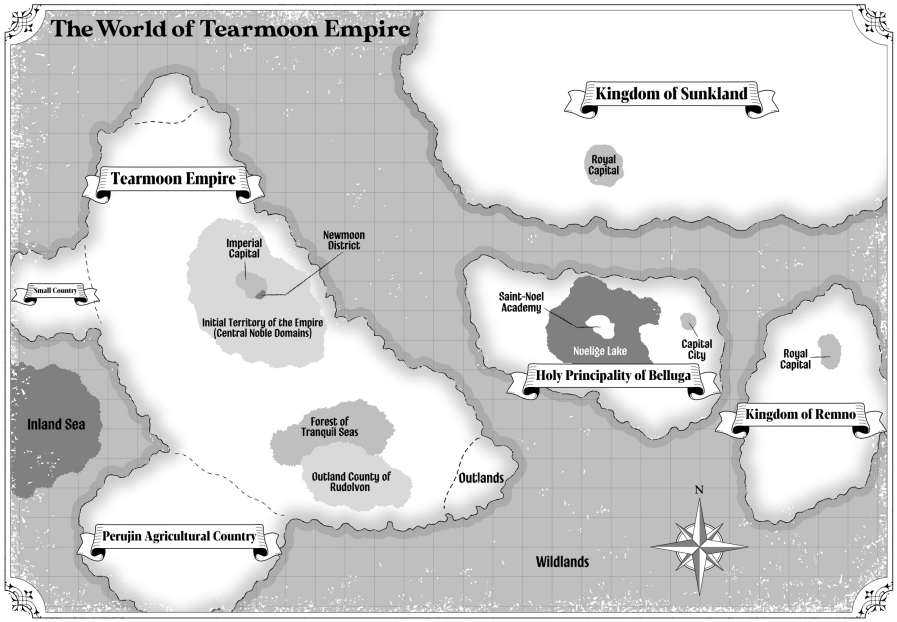
The World of Tearmoon Empire
Kingdom of Sunkland
Royal Capital
Tearmoon Empire
Imperial Capital
Newmoon District
Small Country
Initial Territory of the Empire (Central Noble Domains)
Saint-Noel Academy
Noeliğe Lake
Capital City
Royal Capital
Holy Principality of Belluga
Kingdom of Remno
Inland Sea
Forest of Tranquil Seas
Outland County of Rudolvon
Outlands
N
Perujin Agricultural Country
Wildlands

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Chapter 1: Starting at the Guillotine

The sky was soaked in the crimson light of the setting sun that glared angrily from the horizon onto the Grand Square of the Imperial City. At the center of this famed square loomed a guillotine, its crude and rusty blade dripping red.

The sole Princess of the Tearmoon Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, stood before the deadly instrument and gazed blankly at her surroundings. Voices assaulted her ears, sharp and relentless. They were full of fury and malice, attacking and condemning her with words that cut deep into her heart.

"...How? How did it come to this?"

Why, she wondered, did she — Princess of the proud Tearmoon Empire — have to suffer such a terrible fate? Was it because when she was told there was no bread, she laughed and said to let them eat meat? Was it because when her advances had been rebuffed, she'd vented her frustration by slapping her rival, the daughter of a poor noble? Was it because when she was brought a dish that contained ambermoon tomatoes, which are *disgusting*, she'd fired the cook on the spot?

She continued to ponder the matter — ostensibly oblivious to the fact that she'd pretty much answered her own question — as she looked at the masses of people and the hatred that filled their expressions.

At the front of the crowd was a young man who, with his silver hair and refined air, cut a striking figure as he gave instructions to the surrounding soldiers. He was Sion Sol Sunkland, Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Sunkland. To his side stood a young girl of equal presence. Known as the Saint of Tearmoon, she was the daughter of a poor noble who ruled a remote domain near the edge of the empire. With Sion's help, she had started a revolution to save the people from their suffering. She was Teona Rudolvon, whose own scorn had once ignited the flames of Mia's hatred... But now, those flames had sputtered and died, leaving nothing but ashes of emptiness and resignation.

“How... did it come to this...”

The same words trickled weakly from Mia’s lips. Soon enough, a soldier walked up behind her and forced her to her knees. She looked up and saw her hands being forced against the semi-circles carved into a coarse plank of wood. Then the top half was slammed down to keep its condemned captive in place. The crude surface bit into her skin, leaving painful splinters.

“How... did it come to this...”

The third utterance of her question was met with a reply.

“It’s for the sake of the empire. Now, be a good princess and die.”

She looked up to find the soldier who’d brought her here looking down at her, his eyes cold and hostile. They were eyes that wished for her death. Something seized her from the inside. A chill of terror ran up her spine, but it failed to find her head. The heavy blade of iron had already fallen.

There was a dull thump, and the world began to spin...

A well-used diary, the only personal article she had been allowed, fell to the ground. Slowly, its tattered pages began to turn the color of the blood-red sky.

Thus did Mia Luna Tearmoon die.

That was how the dream went.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Mia screamed. It was a scream that was a tad lacking in the refinement that would befit a princess of the empire.

“M-M-M-My head! My head my head my head my heaaaaaad!”

She frantically patted her own head, checking every angle and surface to make sure it was all there. And then she checked again. Just to be sure.

I-It’s there! I’m fine. I’m all right.

Next, she nervously looked down at her body. The stiff, ragged cloth that had covered her was nowhere to be found, instead replaced by a lavish nightgown made of a fine material that was lovely to touch. It was soft, comfy, and almost excessively frilly. Her skin, once marred by scars big and small, was again smooth and unblemished. She held up her hands. They were smaller than they’d been in her... dream.

As though they belonged to a child...

Still feeling rather heavy in the head, she slowly got out of bed

and walked in front of the full length mirror. When she peered into it, her blue eyes went wide with surprise. Her argent hair was neatly trimmed to shoulder length, and her cheeks glowed with the faint pink of health. The girl looking back at her was the spitting image of her when she was just eleven or twelve. Back then, the empire yet boasted an affluence and prosperity that was nearly unmatched in all the continent...

How terribly strange. I recall being twenty years old...

She frowned.

I was seventeen when they caught me trying to escape... and confined me to a dungeon for three years... and...

Memories of those torturous days resurfaced one after another. She remembered the anguish. The crying. She recalled the sensation of the dungeon's stiff stone floor and the cold dampness of her blanket. The sudden flashbacks were bewildering. She felt confused, but more than that, she felt deeply relieved.

"...O-Oh ho ho. H-How terribly obvious." She giggled loudly to herself, as if she was trying to laugh off the nightmare. "N-None of that ever happened. How could it? What a silly dream. Childish in every way. And how silly of me to have had it."

She kept laughing and laughing, so desperate to fill the room with something other than silence that she didn't realize one, very simple, fact: real children don't think of their nightmares as childish. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something near her pillow.

"...Oh?"

She frowned curiously at the odd object. Upon closer inspection, she found it to be an old diary. In fact, it was *her* diary. She recognized the cover. It was the one she'd been using since she was ten. For some reason though, it looked much older than that. Its pages were aged and ragged and... Why was it covered in dark stains?

It looked exactly like the diary she saw in her dream right before waking up. She reached out a trembling hand and touched the discolored book.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she flipped open the cover to reveal a page soaked through in something dark and red. It was filled from top to bottom with bitter scribblings that matched her dream word for word. They described her long and harrowing experience in vivid detail, from her agony in the dungeon to her terror of the guillotine.

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Mia screamed again. Then, her eyes rolling back, she fainted on the bed right then and there.

Chapter 2: Things Mia Hates and Voices from the Past

Even after regaining consciousness, Mia continued to lie in bed, her limbs splayed sloppily across its surface.

“I feel... terribly ill.”

She had no appetite, and her lunch remained untouched. Her mind was occupied by the nightmare. She wanted to believe it was a nightmare. However, the vivid intensity of the memories and the existence of the bloody diary suggested otherwise.

“Ugh...”

She groaned and rolled from one side of the bed to the other. Then, she groaned again and rolled back. All the while, she kept thinking and thinking. She thought long and hard.

For a whole thirty minutes.

“I feel... terribly hungry.”

Her stomach growled. Barely an hour had passed since she’d turned down lunch.

“Ah-hah,” she said with a dainty clap. “I remember hearing that sweets are good for thinking about things.”

Having had what was undoubtedly an excellent idea, her face lit up as she quickly hopped off the bed and scampered out the door.

The emperor’s family, Mia included, lived in a castle known as the Whitemoon Palace. Its halls were adorned with green, gold, and white moonstone, while lavish ornaments lined the walls. She walked through it, taking in the sights. It was an empire at the peak of its opulence, but, she knew, on the brink of decline.

Eventually, she came to one of the castle’s four dining rooms, the White Night Dining Hall. In the large room was a man; he gave her a puzzled look.

“Why, if it isn’t Princess Mia. What might I do for you, Your Highness?”

He was a bear of a man with a thick, fluffy beard. Mia's eyes widened a little in surprise as she recognized him immediately.

I do recall... that this man is the head chef whom I fired.

On the day of her fourteenth birthday, she'd fired the head chef who kept bringing her vegetables that she hated.

"That would be two years from now..."

"Um, pardon me?"

"Oh, it's nothing much. I feel hungry, so I would like to have some snacks prepared. Some moonberry pie would be marvelous."

The head cook frowned and shook his head.

"I beg your pardon, but I cannot bring Your Highness snacks so close to lunch."

There was a nostalgic ring to his words that made Mia smile in spite of herself. It occurred to her that he was the only one who ever refused her wishes like this. The chef who replaced him simply cooked whatever Mia ordered. And in the end, that got boring. Getting her way each and every time was, after a while, tedious.

"Ah, well, if so, the leftovers from lunch will be fine. Would you be so kind as to bring those please?"

"Huh?"

For some reason, the head chef stared at her in shock.

"Yes?"

"Uh, nothing. Pardon me. I shall bring them right away."

Before long, an assortment of food was brought before her. There was some bread that gave off a sweet, subtle aroma; a stew made with a generous amount of seasonal vegetables; a long piece of marinated rouge salmon; and a fruit bowl.

"Ah, how wonderfully nostalgic," she said as she gazed down the table of food.

In particular, the vegetable stew caught her eye. She felt a wry smile creep across her lips as she dug her spoon in. There they were, mixed in with all the other ingredients. The ambermoon tomatoes that she hated.

I could never stand their sourness.

She held up her spoon and regarded the chunk of ambermoon tomato on it.

I must say though, this does look somewhat appetizing.

Just then, a memory flashed, bringing back to her the food she'd been forced to eat in the dungeon. She remembered the bread; stale, moldy, and so hard that it hurt her teeth. It had tasted like

sand in her mouth. Time and again, her throat would close up, refusing to swallow another bite. At times, they would bring her stew. It was always murky and gray, but the reason why remained a mystery to her. The only things that passed for vegetables in it were grassy weeds, which were deeply unpalatable. She didn't mind the taste though, she really didn't, she just wished it didn't make her stomach hurt for days on end. While she'd heard about the ongoing famine and how it left people with nothing to eat, she'd come to believe that her treatment was the result of spite rather than necessity. She even had proof; after hearing that she hated ambermoon tomatoes, there were days when they had fed her nothing but.

How terribly unpleasant that was...

She could still recall how raw it smelled when they'd held it up to her nose. And when they forced her mouth open and pushed it down her throat, she'd retched from its sour bitterness. She shivered. The memory gave her goosebumps.

Pulling herself out those thoughts, she returned her gaze to the ambermoon tomato on her spoon.

Compared to the ones back then, this seems to almost glow...

She'd intended to leave it uneaten, but curiosity got the better of her and she put the piece in her mouth. Immediately, her eyes snapped open.

"Chef! Someone summon the chef! Now!"

The maid she'd shouted at jumped and asked in a trembling voice, "Y-Your Highness? Is something the matter?"

"Just bring the head chef here!"

The head chef, having heard the sudden commotion, quickly appeared.

"Was something... not to Your Highness's liking?" he said with a nervous smile. His cheek twitched a little.

"What... is this?"

Mia held her spoon up to the head chef's nose. On it was a piece of ambermoon tomato.

"Well, this is... a stew... made with seasonal vegetables..."

The way his eyes wandered suggested he was feigning ignorance. Mia, however, was having none of it.

"Allow me to rephrase. What," she said, pushing the spoon even closer toward the chef's face, "is this vegetable?"

The chef was a good deal taller than Mia, so she had to stand

on her tiptoes and stretch her arm upward to properly brandish the item in question. At first, he simply stared at the spoon. Eventually, the realization that Mia was not backing off deflated him. He hung his head and said in a defeated tone, “I believe... it is an ambermoon tomato, Your Highness.”

The maids around him cast worried glances his way.

“Never! This... This is an ambermoon tomato?”

She stared in disbelief at the object on her spoon. Her hand shook a little as she slowly brought it to her mouth. There was a mild sweetness hidden within its tangy but refreshing taste. Stewed to just the right softness, it melted on her tongue and left behind only its exquisite flavor, which lingered in her mouth.

Something stirred in her.

She brought another spoonful of stew to her mouth, and then another, her motions slow and trance-like. Memories came flooding back. She remembered the acerbity, the raw bitterness. But none of it was there. Each gulp was a piquant juxtaposition of past and present — of recollection and reality. She reached for the bread and took a small bite. A soft aroma, sweet and fresh, filled her nose. For a moment, the whole world seemed to come to a stop with a transfixing silence. Then, a trembling sigh escaped her lips, and the spell was broken.

“Was bread... always this soft?”

Something hit the table with a gentle spatter. She blinked and looked down. A spot was wet. Only then did she notice the tears running down her cheeks.

“Y-Your Highness! What seems to be the matter? Is there a problem with my cooking?” asked the head chef, panic evident in his voice.

Mia turned to him to respond, but with her cheeks full of food, she produced little more than a series of indecipherable noises. Furthermore, she choked on a piece in the process and went red in the face as she wildly flailed her limbs about. Only after exhibiting copious amounts of unprincess-like behavior, along with one of her equally panicked maids bringing her water, did the commotion finally cease.

“That was most satisfying, chef. Your skills are commendable.”

She smiled at the head chef, who was fidgeting nervously.

“I am greatly honored, Your Highness. However, as the stew today was cooked with the intention of bringing out the natural

flavor of its ingredients, I cannot in good faith take credit for its palatability."

"Oh? Is that so? But, hm... Take for example, then, the ambermoon tomato. Did it not have a more pungent flavor? I do remember it being rather disagreeable," she said, recalling the ones she was forced to eat in the dungeon. Those were hard, bitter, and sometimes literally rotten. They were absolutely terrible.

"Ah, well..." The head chef smiled as he rubbed his chin. "Cooked improperly, ambermoon tomatoes can indeed end up tasting as Your Highness describes. However, these have been stewed for three days straight. So long as the right amount of heat is used, they can be prepared by just about anyone."

"My, how curious. If they are such trouble to prepare though, can we not simply avoid eating them altogether...?"

"Absolutely not. That would put the health of Your Highness at risk. For us servants, ensuring the nutrition of the royal family is as important a duty as any."

The head chef pressed his hand to his chest and gave a deep bow. Mia had always taken such shows of deference for granted, assuming it was the natural way of things. It wasn't though. Not at all. After the revolution brought about the empire's downfall and her own personal ruin, almost no one showed her even a morsel of concern, much less deference. She knew this now and allowed her lips to curl up into a tender smile.

"How terribly considerate of you. Know that I am most grateful for your efforts."

"...Huh?"

Hearing honest gratitude from Mia left the head chef in a state of absolute shock. With his mouth agape, he took a few unsteady steps backward, reeling from the impact of what he'd just heard. Never did he imagine he'd receive such kind words from the willful princess.

...At this point, it shouldn't be very hard to infer the way Mia usually behaved.

The chef stared at Mia with the kind of wide-eyed bewilderment usually reserved for feats of apparent magic where, for example, a person somehow flew thirty feet into the air. After multiple blinks of disbelief, he finally managed a reply.

"I-I'm... I'm honored, Your Highness."

It wasn't much, but it was something. He scratched his chin as

if the praise left him abashed, and added, “O-Of course, it might simply be an issue of cost... These foods prepared today were of the finest quality and would cost about a month’s pay for common folk.”

“My, is that so?”

Talks of cost and price never made much sense to Mia. Having been utterly spoiled in her upbringing, she’d lived a life of luxury wherein a simple glance from her was enough to have her every wish fulfilled. She neither knew nor cared about how much her meals and lifestyle cost, or how much money a commoner made in a month. As a result, it would be natural for her to ignore the head chef’s comment.

But she didn’t.

Do you have any idea how much it costs to feed you royals?

An accusatory voice echoed in her mind. She jumped a little and looked around.

Wh-What in the moons?! Who was...

The voice, however, sounded familiar. It was someone from her memory...

Chapter 3: Reunion

"...Who in the world was that, I wonder?"

After her meal, Mia went to the salon in the Aerial Garden. The Aerial Garden was, despite its name, not actually floating in the air. It sat atop the Whitemoon Palace and was constructed on a part of the roof that protruded outwards. The garden itself, filled with beautiful flowers gathered from throughout the empire, was more than impressive enough to entertain foreign royal guests.

Mia spent some time wandering the garden, enjoying the abundant sights and fragrances. Unfortunately, her walk failed to clear her mind, and she continued to wrestle with the nagging sensation that she was forgetting something important. Its identity, however, seemed to be shrouded by a veil of fog, and her attempts to grasp it proved unfruitful.

"...Ah-hah! I know the problem. It would appear that I require more sweets. Maids! Bring me some sweets, would you?"

Feeling a need to make up for the sweets that she was cruelly denied earlier, she clapped her hands. Soon after seating herself at a table in the corner of the garden, a young maid hastily approached her with a tray. When Mia saw the item it carried, her eyes went wide with excitement.

C-Could it be? Th-That's...

It was a cake. A layer of cream covered its body, which was further topped by a generous pile of fresh strawberries. It was, in short, a shortcake. There was nothing special about it. And yet...

C-Cake?! Oh, how terribly long it has been since I've had cake!

Her days in the dungeon went without saying, but even before her capture, the empire's financial troubles had long since deprived her of any chance to eat cake. Naturally, the sight of one sent her into a fit of excitement, and she might have gotten up and done a twirl had the maid not said, "H-Here you go, Your Highneeeeak?!"

The young maid's feet left the ground, and her body, led by the cake, soared through the open air. Mia's jaw dropped as she watched the cake fly right past her face. Then, so did the maid.

With nothing to stop them, both maid and cake followed the same trajectory: toward the ground. They landed together with a gruesome splat, and the cake was no more, reduced to a large white stain on the maid's uniform. This disastrous occurrence left Mia speechless.

"For the love of— Miss Anne! What in the world are you doing?!" An older maid who'd witnessed the sequence of events rushed over. "My sincerest apologies, Your Highness. Are you all right?"

It took her a few seconds, but Mia quickly snapped out of her bewilderment and smiled.

"Quite. I am fine, thank you very much."

Normally, she would have screamed her displeasure at the maid right away. In fact, had this been the Mia of the past, she'd doubtlessly be in the process of doing so already. Fortunately, her experiences in the dungeon had changed her, imparting a kindness as deep as the deepest of cake trays and as broad as the broadest of teacups.

In other words, she'd learned some tolerance. Not enough to be seen as a reasonable person by any means, but perhaps enough to relieve her of her "selfish" title. This was an undeniable sign of maturity. Indeed, to mature is to be human. No matter the pace — be it slower than a turtle or, heck, a snail — Mia stepped ever forward on the path toward maturity! Thus, even after the calamitous case of the compressed cake, Mia still wore a smile! It was strained, but it was still a smile!

"No matter. If you would simply bring me another cake, all will be fine," she said to ease the mood before going even further and asking, "More importantly, is the poor girl there all right?"

She could even spare some consideration for her maids! Also, she figured there was no point making a fuss when they could just bring her another—

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness, but that was the only cake we had for today..."

"You! On your knees, now!"

And just like that, she snapped. Faced with the fact that her only cake had been ruined, Mia's newfound tolerance lasted little longer than an ember in the rain. Make no mistake, cake was serious business! Especially when it had been years since she'd had any. Between good sense and cake, cake won every single time.

“M-My cake... How dare you do this to... You! Look at me!”

“Yeeek!”

The young maid trembled in fear as Mia angrily stomped her foot. With nervous, jerky motions, she pushed herself to her knees and looked up, revealing the face of a girl a few years older than Mia. She was in her mid-teens, and her red hair was coated in fresh cream. A few faint freckles dotted her nose, and her round blue eyes glistened with tears. She wasn’t gorgeously good-looking, but there was a youthful charm to her features. Regardless, she lacked the dignified aura of nobility; hers was a plain sort of prettiness common to village girls.

“Why, you are...”

Upon seeing the girl’s face, a scene resurfaced in Mia’s mind. It was a memory from the worst day of her life — the day of her execution. At the time, she’d been alone in her dungeon, awaiting the inevitable coming of that fateful, fatal moment.

Chapter 4: The Loyal Maid

In a dark and chilly recess of the underground dungeon, Mia sat alone in her cell with her knees against her chest, awaiting her time. Three whole years had passed since she'd been confined to the dungeon. The scores of servants who had buzzed about her, catering to her every whim, were now all but gone. During the first few weeks, a few had come to see her, but their visits ended as soon as they realized she would never reclaim the throne. And so did Mia's long bout of loneliness begin... with a few exceptions.

"Your Highness, I've come to see to your hair."

The young maid with red hair, Anne, bowed politely toward the guard before stepping into the cell. Though Mia was already numb to it, the inside of her cell was no pleasant place. A foul odor, no better than the worst of the slums, hung thick in the air. Anne, however, paid it no mind and lowered herself behind Mia without batting an eye. She then produced a comb she'd been keeping in her breast pocket and ran it through Mia's blackened hair. Having gone unwashed for days on end, the hair resisted Anne's handling. Nevertheless, stroke after diligent stroke, the young maid brought the unruly strands in line.

"I'm sorry for my clumsiness, Your Highness. I was never very good with the comb..."

"...Why?" A quiet whisper escaped Mia's unmoving form. "Why do you still devote yourself to me?"

Ever since Mia's capture, Anne kept coming to see her in the dungeon, never waiting more than a day or two between visits. Sometimes she would bring snacks. Other times, she would come with water and a washcloth. Knowing Mia couldn't bathe, she would wash her as best she could and tidy up her clothes. Day after day, week after week, she came, her loyalty unfaltering.

Mia never understood why. She was the emperor's daughter. As such, there were doubtless a number of people who stood to profit by being around her. In fact, that likely described most of the people in her vicinity. Anne, however, was not one of those people.

The young maid had, if anything, suffered as a result of her proximity to Mia and her famous selfishness.

To be clear, Mia was no tyrant. It was, of course, true that when Anne committed a blunder, she'd give the maid a mouthful. When she was angry enough, it'd turn into a handful, or a footful, or sometimes even a headful.

It occurred to Mia at this point that headbutts might have been behavior that was a tad unbefitting her status.

Nevertheless, she never went any further than that. She'd never taken to the whip or ordered a nearby soldier to "show this fool the blade!" After all, those all seemed to hurt a lot, and Mia wasn't a fan of things that hurt.

Still, she wasn't a good princess either. Not by any measure. No one — a small niche of fetishists notwithstanding — took joy in being abused. They therefore had no reason to like a princess who behaved as such, much less to devote themselves to her even after her fall. And yet, here was Anne. What drove her here? Was she one of the aforementioned fetishists? Certainly not. Then why?

"I've never done anything for you... Never treated you especially well. If anything..."

"Yes, you beat me quite often. There were a few times when you kicked me too, I think?" said Anne with a fond smile. "But did you know, Your Highness? Your kicks, they never hurt one bit."

"Eh? They didn't?"

"Not at all. Compared to the fights I'd have with my little brother?" Anne giggled. "I barely felt them."

She paused for a moment. A pensive silence passed between them. Then, she continued again.

"The reason I keep looking after Your Highness is actually quite simple. I just couldn't leave you alone. That's it."

Mia looked at her maid to find her smiling so, so gently

Their moment of calm was broken by a storm of footsteps. Soldiers descended upon the cell to bring her to the guillotine. Before she was taken away, Mia turned toward Anne. She bowed deeply, keeping her head down as she spoke.

"I can do nothing for you right now, Anne, but to say thank you. I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me. Forgive the foolish princess who repaid your unfailing loyalty with nothing but cheap words of gratitude."

The next instant, Mia felt herself enveloped by a tender

warmth.

“Your Highness, I pray that the gods will smile upon you. May you go with their blessing.”

When she realized that Anne had put her arms around her, Mia’s eyes brimmed with tears. Not once since her capture had she been embraced. The warmth and kindness flowing out of Anne seeped into her heart, filling it with joy... but also regret. The fact that she could do nothing to repay this faithful maid’s kindness left a deep scar of remorse in Mia’s soul. She held her hands to her chest, pressing against the deep ache inside, as she made her way toward the guillotine.

“I remember now...”

Mia walked over to Anne, who was currently profusely apologizing with her head against the ground, and quietly knelt down beside her.

“Your Highness, you’ll get cream on your dress—”

“Silence!”

Mia sharply rebuked the older maid before gently lifting Anne up by the shoulders.

“Miss Anne, please rise.”

“I-I-I’m so sorry, Your Highness...”

“It’s all right. I’m not angry,” said Mia, breaking into a kind smile. “Now, on your feet please. Are you sure you’re not hurt anywhere?”

“Y-Yes. Um, thank you. Very much.”

Anne’s eyes spun wildly with bewilderment as she was pulled up. Mia’s, however, were perfectly steady. She looked straight at the maid.

“Now... I can finally repay you for your loyalty.”

Then, she straightened her posture and declared in a formal tone, “Let it be known that henceforth, you shall be my personal maid-in-waiting. You are to serve me exclusively and shall be responsible for all my daily affairs.”

“...Wha?”

“Y-Your Highness?!”

The onlooking maids immediately burst into commotion.

Chapter 5: An Adorable Way to Show Loyalty

The appointment of a personal maid-in-waiting to the princess was no small matter. It was a prestigious position and the ultimate goal of almost every maid who worked in the palace. Under no circumstances would this position be filled by a commoner. It was given to the second or third daughters of prominent nobility almost as a rule. Most importantly, the position came with a handsome stipend that was almost twice that of the average maid. For Anne, who was not only new but also low-born, her pay almost tripled. The announcement shocked every single maid who heard it, and for good reason; not only was Anne a nobody, she wasn't even an especially good maid and was known for being more than a little scatterbrained. Such a sudden promotion might very well attract the unified hostility of all the other maids. Nevertheless, Mia proudly and cheerfully announced it.

"From now on Anne will be my personal maid, putting her directly under my protection. I trust you all take my meaning?"

With that, Mia snuffed out any chance of Anne becoming the target of disgruntled harassment. She had, in effect, reminded everyone of her power and reputation. As the selfish princess, she had done exactly what she was known for — gotten her own way. Every maid present had seen plenty of their peers being fired at the princess's whim, and they all understood the dangers of defying her. None were willing to take that risk.

"Um, Miss Anne, about the things we said before..."

From this day onward, the relationship between Anne and the senior maids changed drastically. Not only did the random bullying cease, they became exceedingly friendly, often helping her out when she blundered. The sudden change in attitude was unsettling.

I mean, I'm paid more and everything is great, but...

Not knowing why this had happened made her very uneasy. The fact that it was Mia, who was known to fire servants on a

whim, made it that much worse. Being treated so well for no apparent reason was, to be honest, a little scary. In the end, rather than suffer further anxiety, Anne worked up the courage to confront Mia and ask her directly.

"Um, Your Highness, why are you so nice to me?"

That day, Mia was seated in her bedside chair reading a battered old diary. Anne had no idea what was so interesting about it, but lately, Mia spent a lot of time engrossed in the book.

Maybe it's the diary of someone famous...

Roused by Anne's question, Mia looked up from her book and gave her a sweet smile. "I'm simply repaying you for your loyalty."

Her answer left Anne even more confused.

"Um, have I done something for Your Highness before?"

"No, and you need not. I know you to be deeply loyal, and I am repaying you for your devotion. That is all. This matter is not to be discussed any further."

I'm pretty sure I'm not that loyal, though!

Anne barely managed to hold in her frustration. She didn't come to the Whitemoon Palace to dedicate her life in loyal servitude to the imperial family. What did she come for, then? Simple: money. What else?

Anne came from a poor merchant family. With her parents struggling to make ends meet for her and her five younger siblings, her entire family depended on her income as a maid to put food on the table. Getting a significant raise was a very welcome change for her, but, having been rewarded for her "deep" — frankly, non-existent — loyalty, she couldn't help but feel quite uneasy.

Ugh, I'm going to lose so much sleep over this...

Mia, meanwhile, didn't seem to care in the slightest about Anne's internal struggles and simply smiled.

"Now, I find myself in need of something. It would please me so if you could show me some of that loyalty right away..."

"Huh?!"

Anne wanted desperately to scream that she had no loyalty to show, but she ultimately had enough good sense to hold her tongue. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Oh sweet heavens, what is she going to ask me to do?

Mia brought her face close to Anne's and grinned with childish mischievousness. Of course, she should be forgiven for such a gesture, considering she was, very literally, a child.

“Take this, if you will, and procure for me some sweets and snacks of the common people please.”

“...Eh?”

It was a wonderfully adorable way to show loyalty. After being on edge for so long, the sudden and nigh-comical request took Anne completely by surprise, and she almost broke out in a laugh.

“Okay, that sounds...”

Then, she looked at what Mia was holding and shrieked.

“N-No no no! Wait a minute, Your Highness! Th-This is too much!”

In Mia’s hand was a massive gold coin known as a ‘full gold.’ A single one could pay the average maid for sixty days of work.

“My, is that so? The money I have on hand is rather limited though... Ah-hah! I know. Why don’t you use what’s left over to treat your family to some nice food?”

What kind of crazy top-tier restaurant would I have to find to use up that much money?!

“Oh, also, from now on, you are to refer to me not as Your Highness, but as Mia.”

“Huh? But...”

“Now, off you go. I’m counting on you. Do try to be quick about it if you can. Sweets are, after all, rather necessary when one needs to do some thinking... Oh ho ho, I can barely wait to taste the snacks of the common people,” said Mia, then she started humming cheerfully to herself.

For a long time, Anne simply gaped at her new master, her face a mask of utter confusion.

Chapter 6: Princess Mia… Gets Off Her Butt

The Grand Library in the Whitemoon Palace housed knowledge collected from all across the empire. Sitting at one of the wooden desks inside was Mia. She had her chin in her palm, and she let out a dejected sigh.

"Hmm… This has been most unfruitful…"

She had spent most of the last couple days cooped up in the library. After the memory of Anne came back to her, she spent the following week pouring over her diary and sorting through everything she remembered. In the end, she finally came to the conclusion that what she saw wasn't a dream. It was something that had actually happened, or rather, was going to happen in the future. As soon as this realization dawned on her, she shrieked, "N-N-Never! I am *not* going through that again!"

She absolutely couldn't stomach the thought of being put to the guillotine a second time. No matter what, she had to figure out a way to avoid that future. Propelled by a singular desire to escape this gruesome fate, she holed herself up in the library and started reading up on the current state of the Tearmoon Empire. According to her memories, within a few years, the empire's finances would begin to deteriorate. To make matters worse, a famine would strike soon after, followed by the outbreak of a plague. Then there would be a popular revolt that turned into a full-blown revolution. Finally, the empire would be subject to direct foreign intervention when neighboring kingdoms decided to assist the revolutionary army.

That was, she believed, the gist of how things had played out. After reading through all sorts of books in the library and cross-referencing them with her own memories, she summed up all that she'd learned in one simple sentence:

"How terribly complicated this all is."

Unsurprisingly, her pampered childhood had left her hopelessly unprepared for such an undertaking. There was no way she could

thumb through a few books and suddenly understand politics or economics. The problem was that she knew what was going to happen. She just didn't know what to do about it. Frustrated, she held her head in her hands and groaned. Even sugar bingeing didn't help; no matter how many sweets she ate, she couldn't come up with any good ideas. To her credit though, she did sort of begin to understand why it might be a problem for just one of her meals to cost a commoner's entire monthly salary.

"It would appear that I have no choice but to find that man..."

When she recalled the events with Anne, she also remembered another of her loyal subjects. He was a young ministry official, exceptionally competent and fiercely dedicated. Faced with a crumbling empire, he worked his fingers to the bone trying to save it and, in the process, the royal family. Even after Mia had lost everything, he never abandoned her, trying everything he could to help until the very end.

There was, however, a problem.

I don't see his name written anywhere. All I remember is that he was terribly rude...

References to the man included: "four-eyes," "stupid four-eyes," and "goddamned four-eyes." She remembered calling him all sorts of things, but his name was the one thing she might never have called him.

"Well, I can't do much if I don't know his name. I wonder if I'll find any hints in here..."

She flipped back to the beginning of her diary and read through it again. On the page that detailed their first meeting, she found a small line of text that described him as "the fool who got kicked out of Central and was sent to the countryside."

"Ah-hah! I do recall that he held office in the capital for some time... Perhaps I should go look for him."

It was possible that he was still in the imperial capital. Figuring that it was best to make haste, Mia got to her feet and had Anne make arrangements for an excursion.

Lunatear, the imperial capital of the Tearmoon Empire, was home to five ministries that aided the emperor in governance.

The Azure Moon Ministry was the administrative agency for the capital city. The Golden Moon Ministry handled taxes. The Scarlet Moon Ministry was the administrative agency for the surrounding

rural regions. The Jade Moon Ministry handled foreign affairs. Finally, the Ebony Moon Ministry commanded the seven armies of the empire.

Mia was headed for the ministry nearest to the Whitemoon Palace, the Golden Moon Ministry. She didn't have any particular reason for doing so. Neither the fact that he'd labored extensively to restore the empire's finances nor the fact that he'd been extremely fussy about the usage of money crossed her mind. It was, in all honesty, just a hunch.

"Um, Princess Mia, what exactly are we doing here?" said Anne with a puzzled frown.

"There's someone I wish to meet."

Mia's answer was short and simple.

"Someone... you wish to meet? You mean..."

Anne's hands shot to her mouth and she gasped. Then, she nodded in apparent comprehension.

"If that's the case, then rest assured that I'll do everything in my power to help."

"...Hm? Is that so? Well, if you insist. I certainly appreciate it."

Mia wasn't sure why Anne seemed so enthusiastic all of a sudden, but she didn't dwell on it.

"I do hope he's here... Oh, my."

They heard a pair of voices. It sounded like they were arguing.

"Why is such wasteful spending allowed to continue unchecked? You know just as well as I do that at this rate, it won't take long for the empire's finances to implode!"

"Bah, enough of this talk."

"But..."

"I said enough! What good is there in fussing over such trivial details?"

"They're not trivial details. If this keeps up, the empire will..."

She smiled. Now here was a voice she recognized.

"My, my," she said, feeling a mild sense of nostalgia, "it would appear that we've struck gold. All that time spent in the Grand Library was well worth it!"

The total irrelevance of her limited learning in the library notwithstanding, Mia did indeed happen upon a stroke of very good fortune.

Chapter 7: Princess Mia… Puts on a Smug Grin

The first time she'd met him, things couldn't have gone worse. That day, Mia was calling on him, a young ministry official, to formally recognize his service. Her first impression of the young man wasn't bad. In fact, she quite liked him. He had smooth hair that was just long enough to cover his ears, and he wore a pair of foreign-made glasses. Behind the small lenses were eyes that sparkled with intellect. Though there was an air of distance to him, his handsome features were more than enough to catch Mia's eye. It was for this reason that Mia put on a smile, which she seldom showed commoners, and greeted him in an uncharacteristically gentle voice.

His reply, however, was cold and sharp.

"Do you have any idea how much it costs to feed you royals?"

"Wh-Why, how terribly rude of you."

The sudden affront left Mia baffled. The bespectacled man before her was apparently angry, but she hadn't the slightest idea why. It was exceedingly rare for Mia to see someone mad at her, never mind being reprimanded by someone she'd just met for the first time. None of it made any sense.

"I'll have you know that I'm here to recognize your efforts! Why, then, must I be subjected to such an offense?" she said indignantly. She had, after all, just bestowed upon the young man some words of appreciation.

Financial implosion and a raging epidemic, compounded with the revolt of a minor tribe, had pushed the empire to the brink of collapse. Officers, officials, and even top ministers had all been on the verge of fleeing their posts. That was when Mia had heard that there was one official who refused to abandon his duties and was continuing to work tirelessly all by himself.

"How terribly admirable. I do believe I should personally pay him a visit."

So she had, and there she was.

She had come all this way! Just for him! So how come she was the one who had to watch this supposedly loyal young official give her the fingers-to-glasses look of condescension and his whole "do you have any idea how much" spiel? And not only that, he kept going!

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop standing there like a bump on a log. At least get out of the way. Also, there are plenty of things that only you can do, so if you've got so much time on your hands, please make yourself useful, Your Highness."

What insolence! What terrible insolence! This man's attitude is absolutely unforgivable!

Mia had been so upset by the encounter that she lost an entire night's sleep over it. Even after getting into bed, she kept grinding her teeth in anger as she tossed and turned over and over. By the time she'd stopped thrashing around, it was already bright outside.

In summary, their first meeting went horribly.

However, it was also true that even after Mia had been thrown into the dungeon, he remained steadfast in his work, running tirelessly from place to place in his lonely attempt to restore the empire. She'd heard that he'd appealed for her release, and among her countless subjects, he and Anne were the only two to visit her the day she was executed. Consequently, Mia's trust in the man ran deep.

If he'd only be nicer with his words, I'd have no complaints about him.

"...Hmph. Very well. If you're so passionate, Junior Tax Officer Ludwig, then I'll allow you to work to your heart's content. You are officially appointed to the Scarlet Moon Ministry."

The situation quickly took a turn, and the older official's patience had run out.

Ah-hah! Ludwig! That was his— W-Wait. Ministry of Scarletmoon?

"You're sending me to the countryside?"

"Correct. Why don't you go pull in more taxes from the country people? That'll solve this empire-wide crisis of yours, won't it?"

"But..."

Why, that's no good at all! That stupid four-eyes has already gotten himself kicked out of his job!

Mia panicked. The last time he was sent to the countryside, he didn't return until it was far too late. By then, the Tearmoon Empire

was already beyond repair. In other words, if he goes...

I-I'm going straight to the guillotine!

Mia leapt out of the shadows and ran up to the two men.

"H-Hold on just a minute!"

"Ugh, who is it now... Wha— Y-Your Highness!"

"I believe I've heard enough to understand what's going on here."

The higher-ranking official dabbed at the thick sheen of sweat that suddenly coated his forehead. "Ah, well, I do apologize for subjecting Your Highness to such tedious discussion—"

"That doesn't matter. More importantly, I must say that I find it terribly unwise to be throwing young officials to the wayside with such impunity. I'd much prefer having them speak their minds and defend their arguments so that we might act on their ideas for the benefit of the empire."

"Ah, I see, but..."

Before the older man could finish his thought, Mia shot him a glare.

"My? Is that resistance I hear?"

"Wha— No! O-O-Of course not!"

"Lovely, I'm glad to hear that. By the way, you, the young man there. I believe your name was, hrm, Ludwig, was it?"

"Huh? Uh, yes..." replied Ludwig, somewhat puzzled by the sudden mention of his name.

"I'd like to have a word or two with you. I do hope that's all right," said Mia as she grabbed Ludwig's hand and pulled him away to another room.

"Hey— Uh, I mean, pardon me, Your Highness, but may I know what your concern is? There are many other matters that need my attention..."

At first, Ludwig was rather taken aback by this abrupt turn of events, but, having regained his composure, he was now rolling his eyes at the young princess's seemingly senseless behavior.

"I wish to talk to you for a little while."

"Uh, I'm pretty sure I just said I'm busy..."

"There's something I'd like to ask you about."

"...In one ear and out the other, huh. The selfish princess indeed. I see your infamy is more than deserved," said Ludwig with a resigned shrug before letting out a long sigh. "Well? Let's hear it,

then.”

“Very well. I suppose the simplest way to put this would be... How might one restore the state of the empire’s finances?”

As soon as he heard this question, Ludwig’s eyes narrowed.

“Hmph. In that case, let me ask you a question, Your Highness. Do you have any idea how much it costs to feed you?” he said, glancing patronizingly down at her.

In return, Mia replied, “Well, I do believe a single meal costs the equivalent of a month’s salary for you, putting its worth at roughly one crescent gold. Am I correct?”

She then crossed her arms and looked at him with the smuggest grin she’d ever worn.

Chapter 8: The Greatest Ally

Mia's answer left Ludwig frozen in shock. As she took in the look of absolute astonishment on his face, she felt a strong wave of emotion well up within her.

This... This feels so terribly good!

The sweet taste of triumph washed over her brain like a narcotic. Her whole body felt light. She needed more.

"In fact, the financial difficulties of the empire can all be boiled down to the simple fact that there is more money going out than coming in. In order to resolve this discrepancy..."

Mia kept going and going, rattling off the empire's problems one after another. She was on a roll. Her speech flowed with the ease and smoothness that bespoke exhaustive research and thorough understanding. After spending the last couple of days holed up in the Grand Library, Mia had become deeply knowledgeable about... well, nothing in particular.

Of course she hadn't.

In fact, as the astute among you might have already realized, everything she said was what she'd been told by Ludwig in the (hopefully) alternate world of the future. In other words, she was just parroting his words back to him. It was basically plagiarism.

The events of that first day came back to her. In her mind, she could still see the haughty expression he'd worn as he lectured her about topics big and small, his voice thick with mocking sarcasm. Granted, almost everything he'd said went right over her head, but nevertheless...

Never... I'll never forget the humiliation I suffered during those days!

The experience was so mortifying for her that every single word was burned into her mind. With the humiliating memory freshly resurfaced, she recalled exactly what he'd said to her, repeating it back to him word for word.

She spoke of the problems with the empire, the problems with the nobles, the problems with the Imperial Capital, the problems

with the neighbouring kingdoms, and much more. Had anyone borne witness to their conversation in the future, they'd be screaming bloody murder at the nerve of her. The brazenness with which she aped his teachings was almost impressive.

Meanwhile, Ludwig's expression had changed from surprise to something that bordered on reverence.

"...Enough." He held up a hand to stop the pontificating princess. "Please. That will be enough." Then, he lowered himself onto one knee and bent forward in a deep and courteous display of respect. "I am without words. Never would I have imagined the royal family was home to one as brilliant as yourself."

His words sent a jolt of exhilaration through Mia's body.

B-Brilliant?! Did that miserable four-eyes just say something good about me?! Mia trembled with sheer delight. *Ahhh. I almost feel as if this day — this very moment — is why I've come back here.*

However, before she could bask in the glory of her triumph, Ludwig spoke again.

"However, in that case, what need does Your Highness have for my help? With such boundless knowledge, surely, you can restore the empire all by yourself."

Mia paled instantly.

O-Oh no! I've gone too far!

In her excitement, she'd failed to realize that she'd gone on too much of a roll and rolled herself right off a cliff. It was true that she was repeating what Ludwig had said. However, he'd said all that only after tirelessly surveying the surrounding regions and looking into the affairs of other kingdoms. In other words, future Ludwig had to do a lot of work to come to those conclusions. For present-day Ludwig, who was still new to this job, Mia's words seemed like divine providence. Her perfect grasp of current events and plausible predictions of future developments, coupled with the fact that she was only twelve years old, was simply too much for him to handle. Befuddled and bedazzled, he took leave of his good sense and simply regarded the princess with awe. In his mind, all he had to do was leave it to this veritable goddess of wisdom he'd happened upon, and everything would turn out just fine. Needless to say, Mia was no goddess of wisdom, and pretty much nothing would turn out fine if left to her. With her back against the wall, the pea-brained princess forced herself to think.

I... I have no idea! Nothing is coming to mind at all!

...True to form as ever. Fortunately for her, however, the mind of the young official before her was not paltry in the slightest.

"Ah, but of course. That makes sense. Your Highness is still young. Were you perhaps concerned that people will not lend a serious ear to your words?"

His interpretation was very convenient for Mia — very wrong too, but definitely very convenient.

"Th-That's absolutely it!"

She saw her chance and jumped on it. If a wave of fortune was coming her way, she was going to ride it. She'd ride the damn thing to the moon and beyond. Furthermore, she was currently experiencing a rare moment of mental acuity.

"Besides, brilliant as I am, I can still be wrong at times. That's why I'd like you to think about these issues as well and speak your mind to me."

At this point, anyone with a decent sense of modesty would have thought, "What kind of person calls herself brilliant?" Even basic politeness would call for at least a raised eyebrow or two. However, as a result of his lingering astonishment, Ludwig currently possessed neither of those qualities.

"A mind unclouded by its own brilliance... and ears that welcome subordinates' advice... Your Highness... You are truly..."

Ludwig thought of his own superior who, just moments prior, had brushed off his appeals without so much as a first thought. He felt something hot well up inside him. Mia's words had thoroughly moved him. Never did he imagine that the girl he was speaking to was actually a dumb-ass princess who would have been entirely helpless without the wisdom that he provided.

"My path is now clear to me..."

Once more, he lowered himself into a deep salute. Keeping his head bowed, he addressed her with the utmost respect.

"Your Highness. I, Ludwig, pledge myself to your service with all my body and soul," said the earnest young official.

"How terribly kind of you. I accept your pledge," replied the deeply satisfied princess.

Thus did Mia — after gaining the loyal maid Anne — acquire her second, and greatest, ally.

Chapter 9: Prediction/Bloody Diary

"Hehehe..."

Mia wore a bright smile as she chuckled softly to herself.

"Did something good happen, Princess Mia?" asked a curious Anne.

"My, how did you know?"

Ever since returning to her room, Mia had been in good spirits. Great spirits, even. After all, that miserable four-eyes — Ludwig, rather — had called her brilliant.

Brilliant... He called me brilliant! Me! Oh ho ho ho!

She was in seventh heaven. Or cloud nine. Whatever was up there, she was in it. Her mood was fantastic, and it wasn't likely to change for a good long while.

"Ah-hah! I need to write down the events of this memorable day in the diary so I don't forget..."

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Mia grabbed her diary and dove onto her bed. She rolled her tiny body across her duvet, brimming with energy. Finding it rather enjoyable, she kept rolling back and forth, feeling the gentle embrace of the moonfowl down that filled the high-quality mattress. With her face buried in a soft blanket, she kicked her feet up and down as though she were being tickled. The fluttering motion flipped up her skirt, exposing the smooth skin of her young legs. It was, all things considered, a rather un-princessly look.

"Oh he he. Ohhhh ho ho."

"...Princess Mia, please. That's indecent."

Even Anne's admonishment failed to have any effect. Mia looked at her with the same delighted grin and said, "Oh ho ho. I'm the empire's brilliant princess, didn't you know? Her Brilliant Highness Mia sees no problem here."

It was the kind of brattish comment that would have irked most people, but Anne simply smiled as if she'd just heard the most adorable thing.

Oh, look how she beams! She must be so happy to have been

complimented by that gentleman she's fond of!

Anne was in the midst of her own misinterpretation of Mia's actions. As a result, she felt in every way the older sister watching over the blossoming of a younger sister's first love, and she saw Mia's every action through a lens of kindly affection.

As the Tearmoon saying goes, a single misplaced button messes up the whole shirt. Misunderstandings, once ingrained, can be fiendishly difficult to undo.

Meanwhile, Mia was still beating at the bed with her feet as she wrote a new entry into her diary. She began with making Anne her personal maid-in-waiting and continued through all the events that led up to today, adding a few bells and whistles here and there to enhance the reader's experience.

My, how quickly I'm writing! It would appear that I have a talent for literary composition! Perhaps I should be a poet or playwright!

Her pen flew across the pages with an ease that spoke of her good mood. When she finished writing the final word and closed the book, a thought crossed her mind.

Ah-hah! Since I've changed the contents of this *diary, I wonder what has happened to the diary from the future?*

A bout of curiosity led her to place the two diaries side by side. One was still pristine, while the other was blood-soaked. If both were the same item, what would happen now that she'd written something different into one of them? Without expecting anything in particular, she flipped open the bloody diary.

"Wh-What in the world?!"

The words in the old diary blurred and twisted into misshapen blots before reappearing as new lines of text that mirrored what she'd just written in the other one. Furthermore, the phenomenon did not stop there. It continued into further entries, each of which warped in similar fashion and reshaped their contents accordingly. It looked like the future was being rewritten before her eyes.

It doesn't just look like it... The future is *being rewritten!*

Suddenly, it all clicked. She realized that by gaining Ludwig's support and having him begin his efforts earlier, she'd caused significant changes to the course of history.

Could this mean that...

She quickly sat straight up on her bed. Then, she reached toward the bloody diary with one trembling hand and flipped through it. Upon reaching the final page, a short, sad sigh escaped

her lips.

It... still didn't change... After all that...

The final entry, cruelly unchanging, yet foretold of her execution.

How... does it come to this...

Her whole world seemed to darken under a cloud of despair. Faced with the unforgiving fact of her tragic end, panic gripped her heart. She felt a sudden and overpowering desire to run far away. To escape it all.

It's all right. It's all right. I still have time.

She took a deep breath to calm herself. Then, she read through the diary a second time. There were entries that detailed how, after gaining Ludwig's help, the empire's financial difficulties did see a turn for the better. However, it was a mere droplet of water upon the empire's blazing wildfire of woes. Ultimately, there were too many problems that couldn't be solved. From the outbreak of a plague in the capital's slums to the revolt of a minority tribe in the Outlands — along with much more — the empire had no shortage of crippling issues that threatened its existence. And Mia hadn't the slightest clue how to solve any of them.

Th-This is no good at all! This is no time to be letting Ludwig's compliments go to my head!

Feeling like she'd just had a bucket of cold water poured over her head, she leapt to her feet.

"Miss Anne!" She addressed her personal maid. "I must think!"

Then, in a voice that rang with command and purpose...

"To allow my brain to work better, I request that you bring me some sweets!"

She asked for so little...

Chapter 10: Lunatear's Shadow

Where there is light, it must surely give birth to shadow...

Even within Lunatear, the glorious capital of the mighty Tearmoon Empire, there was a place from which people averted their eyes. Overlooked by a stretch of the city walls was the Newmoon District, the slums of the imperial capital. There lived the poorest of the poor, for whom food was scarce and illness fast and fatal. Those who fell sick could often be found abandoned on the streets. It was a place where the workings of civilised society had all but vanished, save for a small church and an orphanage.

A young girl walked through the forsaken district, her beautiful dress almost comically out of place among the broken roads and crumbling buildings. She was none other than Mia Luna Tearmoon, the beloved daughter of the Tearmoon Emperor. With a slight spring in her step, she hopped from place to place, gazing curiously around at her surroundings.

"Your Highness, it is dangerous for you to be too far ahead. I must ask that you remain behind us..."

Beside the young girl were four armed guards; along with her maid-in-waiting, Anne, and her newly-persuaded ally, Ludwig. In order to explain why such an eye-catching group of people was in a place like this, the narrative clock would need to be rewound a few hours back.

"Well then... it would appear that this problem... is indeed one that needs to be solved."

Thanks to the sweets that Anne brought, Mia's mind was sharper than ever. After reading over her diary again, she'd found an entry that caught her eye.

"The plague... I remember having eggs thrown at me because of this."

A few years from now, the capital would be devastated by an outbreak of disease. It was a terrible incident that even Ludwig wasn't able to predict. Ultimately, ten percent of the population

would succumb to the epidemic. According to the rewritten diary, the empire's finances — which were just beginning to improve after Ludwig's efforts — would be dealt a crippling blow by this disaster and would spiral ever downwards thereafter.

"Hmmm, I know that we can't simply ignore it... but how *does* one go about preventing a plague?"

As a rule, Mia was not a fan of hard work. When push came to shove, she could shut herself into the Grand Library, but that never lasted long. Plus, she fundamentally hated the thought of studying and looking things up. What should she do, then?

"Well, let's keep things simple for now — when in doubt, ask for help."

The solution was easy; if she didn't have the answer, she'd just ask someone to give it to her. After all, she now had access to a convenient source of knowledge.

"Miss Anne, we are heading out."

"Where are we going, Princess Mia?"

"To speak with the stupid four— I mean, Ludwig."

"Ah, the gentleman from the other day... In that case, we'd better get you fixed up and looking nice and pretty."

Anne's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm all of a sudden.

"Is that so? I personally think I look quite nice as is..."

Mia was currently clothed in a chic black dress that she often wore in her room. While it might be a tad bland for the ballroom floor, she considered it perfectly suitable for a casual meeting.

"That won't do at all! This is the perfect chance to catch his eye and leave an impression! We can't have you passing it up! Now, come on, Princess Mia. Off to the dressing room we go."

Grudgingly, Mia allowed herself to be dragged into the dressing room, where Anne promptly enlisted the help of a nearby veteran maid to coordinate Mia's clothes. They decided upon a light blue dress embellished with blossoms of ashmoon cherry. Its skirt was trimmed relatively short in a design that simultaneously emphasized the charms of the wearer and allowed for freedom of movement.

"My, I've never seen this dress before."

Considering the fact that Mia owned enough dresses to fill five rooms, there was no way she could keep track of every single one. Inevitably, there were plenty of dresses that she outgrew without ever wearing.

“You look great, Princess Mia,” said Anne with a smile before starting to tend to Mia’s hair. She ran a comb through the lustrous argent strands over and over until they were smooth as silk. Then, she held them in place with a hairpin adorned with a rainbow-colored gem.

When Mia looked in the mirror and saw the hairpin, her eyes narrowed a little, and she whispered, “My, that’s…”

“What’s the matter, Princess Mia?”

It wasn’t Mia but a veteran maid in charge of the dressing room who answered.

“That was an offering from a certain wealthy merchant last year. Her Highness was most pleased by the gift.”

Anne laughed cheerfully after hearing the wardrobe maid’s story.

“So that’s where this came from. It’s perfect for this occasion, then.”

“I suppose so…” replied Mia, a hint of sorrow creeping into her voice.

To be honest, I don’t really like this…

It wasn’t the hairpin’s design that she minded. She was actually quite fond of how it looked. However, due to a certain reason, she couldn’t wholeheartedly appreciate wearing it. For a while, she debated whether she should refuse the ornament.

But for going to see the stupid four-eyes, I suppose this is enough?

In the end, she chose silence.

Chapter 11: A Great Leader Bestowed Upon Us by the Heavens (Note: A Terrible Misunderstanding)

For Ludwig, it was the meeting of a lifetime.

Born as the second son of a merchant, he was gifted with a cleverness easily apparent from childhood. With his older brother destined to take over the family business, he directed his aspirations elsewhere, resolving at a very young age to become a government official. Once he began studying for his goal, however, it did not take long for him to realize the sheer scale of the corruption that festered within the Tearmoon Empire.

The reasons were varied, but it was clear that much of it stemmed from the noble houses, of which the emperor's own family was the most powerful. This was perhaps why Ludwig bore such disdain for nobles and royalty; that is, those of so-called high birth. Then, one day, a young girl suddenly appeared before him.

Her name was Mia Luna Tearmoon. With her beautiful argent hair — which glistened as though infused with moonbeams — and the circumstances of her birth — the princess was as highborn as they came — she was the very epitome of the kind of nobility he'd always detested. And yet this girl, with all her privilege and power, came to him. And *asked him* to lend her his strength to restore the empire.

He would never forget the gleam of intelligence he'd seen in her eyes. It was dazzling, almost divine... In that instant, he'd felt as though he was before the moon goddess herself, bathed in her light. Even now, his heart would race with exhilaration whenever he recalled the scene. Ever since that day, in an effort to live up to the trust Mia placed in him, he applied himself heart and soul to his work. When he ran into resistance from his superiors, he dismissed their complaints by flaunting the name of the princess. Figuring that his actions had surely reached Mia's ears, he took her ensuing silence to mean that he was acting in accordance with her desires.

Presumably, she had intended that once she informed him of her thoughts regarding the empire, he would take the initiative and do as he saw fit. Her stance was clear: she pointed the way, and he plotted the course. It was textbook good leadership; once the overarching vision was communicated, the particulars should be left to the front-line experts and their judgment should be respected. Though it seemed such a simple decision, leaders who made it correctly were few and far between, their poor judgment leading to the downfall of countless kingdoms throughout the ages.

And yet, here was a girl, merely twelve years of age, who got it. Who defied the trend of history and made the correct decision. Ludwig shivered as a jolt ran down his spine.

"Could she... She must... Surely, she is a great leader bestowed upon us by the heavens..." whispered Ludwig as he looked up at the sky in reverence.

...It goes without saying, of course, that pretty much all of what he thought was nothing more than a figment of his own imagination.

Just in case that wasn't clear to anyone.

"Good afternoon, Ludwig."

"Why, if it isn't the princess. Welcome, Your Highness," said Ludwig, pausing in his work. Just as he was about to stand up, Mia put up a hand to stop him.

She smiled and said, "Please, be at ease. Know that your hard work is very much appreciated. Thank you, Ludwig."

"You're most welcome, Your Highness, but the credit should all go to you. Thanks to you, my work has been proceeding far more smoothly. Please accept my gratitude."

Ludwig bowed respectfully, which elicited a satisfied nod from Mia. He let out a sigh of relief, taking her nod as a sign that his behavior to date was not misguided. After all, he was in the presence of someone whose wisdom far surpassed his own; he needed to stay sharp.

"Very well. Now, I've actually come today because I'd like your advice on a very particular matter."

"My advice, you say..."

Ludwig folded his arms and furrowed his brows as he chewed on the princess's words.

Judging by Her Highness's tone, it doesn't seem like she has any

complaints about my work so far... But then again, I can never be sure. Maybe there's something I've missed.

After all, he figured, he was speaking with someone who might as well be a moon goddess given human form. Her intellect certainly bordered on the divine.

At this point, after a period of extreme and uncontrolled inflation, Ludwig's opinion of Mia was well past the realm of reason and good sense.

...The poor man.

"Indeed. Though we *could* have our discussion here..." Mia lowered her tone and showed him a toothy smile. "I'd actually prefer it if you would escort me somewhere else."

"And where might that be?"

"The Newmoon District..."

Ludwig's jaw hit the floor when he heard those words.

"Wh-What?! You wish to... go to the slums?!" he exclaimed, his voice cracking a little in astonishment.

The Newmoon District was the slum closest to the city walls of Lunatear. It was a place shunned by even the average citizen, never mind nobility or, heaven forbid, royalty. Ludwig himself had never set foot in the district, and he never wished to either. Under no circumstances — none whatsoever — should the sole Princess of the Tearmoon Empire be going there.

His outburst was immediately echoed by a distressed Anne, for whom Mia's words were a rude awakening.

"Milady Mia! You can't! That's going much too far!" shrieked the maid-in-waiting, who until now had been under the impression that Mia was simply here to meet Ludwig. For a young maiden such as herself, the Newmoon District was the kind of place she wanted to avoid at all costs. She'd been told by her parents *to stay away from there because it's dangerous*, and she'd said the same to her younger siblings.

"It's something that must be done," said Mia, dismissing their complaints with a shake of her head. "I want you to take a look with your own eyes, Ludwig, and tell me what you think."

The resolve in her voice kept them from saying anything more.

Chapter 12: The Stench of a Plague

After Mia made her intentions clear, Ludwig scrambled to arrange for soldiers to accompany them. Due to the abruptness of the request, he only managed to gather four guards, but they were all highly competent. While such a small group would be wholly insufficient for something such as battlefield reconnaissance, it should be enough for their purposes, especially considering they were technically still inside the capital city.

Frankly, I'd prefer to have at least ten more people with us, but given the rushed circumstances, this will have to do, he thought with a sigh.

This was, after all, the emperor's daughter herself heading out into the city. There was no such thing as being too careful.

"By the way, Your Highness, is His Imperial Majesty aware of your plans for today?"

"Huh? You mean Father?" asked Mia with a curious tilt of her head. "There's no need to worry about that. For something like this, I'll just tell him about it afterwards."

As the young princess walked away after dismissing the issue with a casual wave of her hand, Ludwig couldn't help but feel a sense of unease in the pit of his stomach.

When they finally arrived at the Newmoon District, they found it to be every bit as bad as the rumors claimed. There was a palpable change to the surroundings as they stepped into the area. Even the air had a different quality to it, which one of the guards described very succinctly with, "Damn, it stinks here."

The man frowned and held his nose.

A terrible stench permeated the streets. The whole area reeked of rot, sweat, and general filth. It was the kind of pungency that would never exist in the castle or any upper-class residential area, and it assaulted the sensibilities of their whole company. Everyone — the guards, Anne, even Ludwig — couldn't help but grimace at the offensive odor. Everyone except...

"Is that so? I don't find it to be all that bothersome..."

Mia was completely unperturbed. For her, who'd spent three years confined to a dungeon, this place wasn't all that bad. Being in the open, at least there was plenty of fresh air.

"It must be terribly difficult for the people here to even bathe, yes? Spend three days without cleansing the body and anyone will start to smell. Such is the nature of humans. It's really not much different than travelers who come from afar," she said with a shrug. "Now, come on. Let us proceed."

Then, she walked off. For some time, her guards could only gape at the small but intrepid figure of their young princess stepping boldly forward into the heart of the decaying district.

Hidden amongst the dirty roads, dark alleys, and decrepit houses were countless pairs of eyes, all looking out from the shadows. The focus of their perplexed gazes was one peculiar group of people, at the center of which was Mia. She paid no mind to what a jarring sight they were and continued to make her way down the street.

"Your Highness, where exactly is our destination?" asked the leader of the guards.

"Hmm, good question. I haven't really decided on one, but... What's that?" she asked, turning her gaze to where a child was curled up in a ball on the side of the road. As she approached the hunched form, she found a young boy wrapped in pieces of ragged cloth that barely passed for clothes. He was younger than Mia, no more than five or six years of age. She gently placed her hand on his thin, bony shoulder.

"Wai— Your Highness!"

"Pardon me, are you all right?"

Slowly, the boy looked up at Mia. He gave no reaction. His eyes were cloudy and seemed devoid of the lively spark of childhood.

"Is something bothering you? Do you feel bad somewhere?"

"..."

His parched lips briefly stirred, but they emitted no sound. Instead, the reply came from behind in the form of Ludwig's voice.

"Judging by his appearance, I'd say he suffers not from illness but hunger. Such sights are not uncommon around here."

"I see... Hunger is no small suffering."

Mia asked Anne to give the boy some of the snacks they had on hand before turning to face Ludwig.

“Ludwig, I have a question for you.”

“What is it?”

“If I wished to ensure that a plague does not occur here in the future, what should I do?”

“Did you say... a plague...”

Mia’s words hit him like a clap of thunder. For a second, everything went white. He stumbled back a little, utterly shocked by the question. Such a possibility had never even crossed his mind. He knew that within a few years, the empire would undoubtedly face financial collapse. Pressed by a sense of urgency, he’d racked his brains thinking of ways to reduce spending and increase tax revenue, and he had every confidence in the efficacy of the policies he’d begun implementing. However, all his efforts — everything he’d worked for and built up — would be rendered next to meaningless if a plague were to break out. Only now did he realize the terrible possibility of such an event, all thanks to the warning from the tiny princess standing before him.

“In order to... prevent a plague...”

Before he could contemplate the issue further, his thoughts were interrupted by Anne.

“Princess Mia, I think we should take this boy to a place where he can get some rest. There’s a church nearby. Should we head over there?”

“I do believe we should. I’d hoped to have a chance to see all manner of sights, so this works out perfectly.”

Ludwig gazed silently at the smiling Mia, feeling like he finally understood why she’d brought him here.

Chapter 13: The Secret of the Hairpin

After traversing a series of narrow, winding alleyways, they arrived at their destination: a small church slightly tilted to one side. It had a large yard, from which the spirited voices of children could be heard. After leaving the child they found earlier with the sister, Ludwig gave the church another once-over.

"So, this is the only place here that can provide care to the sick..."

It was a humble building that, even with the attached orphanage, could house only a very limited number of people. There was no way it could provide food and care to all the needy in the area.

They say seeing is believing, but this might be the first time I've fully appreciated that saying. Her Highness was absolutely right. It's extremely likely that an outbreak of disease could occur here.

While Ludwig was musing, Mia was building rapport with the father who was in charge of this church. While she was not a particularly religious person, she figured it couldn't hurt to make some connections in the circles of the faithful. As an organization, the Church held sway over many kingdoms. If things ever went south, having friends there would be very useful for seeking asylum.

No matter the time or place, Mia always operated under the motto "me first."

"Father, thank you very much for accepting this child into your care."

"There's no need for thanks. We're merely doing our duty as servants of God. We're also deeply humbled to be graced by the presence of Your Highness, and in a place such as this."

"It's nothing. After all, this place, like all the others, is a district within the beloved realm that I call home. By the way, Father, would you happen to have any friends in other kingdoms, or..."

Mia wasted no time getting to the point.

"Your Highness..."

She turned to the sound of Ludwig's voice.

“My, Ludwig. Is it time to go already?”

“No, I simply wished to express that I fully understand Your Highness’s intentions now.”

“I see,” said Mia with a satisfied nod. “That’s wonderful. I was right to come to you. So, what can we do to make sure a plague doesn’t break out in the Newmoon District?”

“...There are two main ways to prevent a plague. We need to bolster the supply of food to this region and replenish the stamina of the residents, and we also need to improve access to healthcare.”

Vocalizing his thoughts allowed Ludwig to fully appreciate just how difficult a task he was proposing. All the work he’d been doing recently revolved around reducing spending. In order to improve the state of the empire’s finances, either revenue had to increase or expenditure had to decrease. There was no simple way of increasing revenue, so inevitably, his primary focus became the reduction of wasteful spending. However, both distributing food and building hospitals were tasks that required a ton of money.

Ludwig grimaced. And that was just the start. Keeping the effort going would be even more costly. How much money was he going to need? And where was he going to find all this money to begin with? He had no idea. Even if he had Mia’s royal influence as backing, it might still be impossible. After all, powerful as she was, she was still a child.

Mia, on the other hand...

“So what you’re saying is that we need money... I see.” She gave a small nod, then folded her arms as if she was thinking about something. “Hm, in that case... Ah-hah. Would it be enough if I sold this?”

Slowly, she removed her hairpin.

“...Huh?”

The large gem on it glowed with iridescence, confirming it to be the one she received only days before from a renowned wealthy merchant.

“Princess Mia! That’s... but you love that pin?!”

Anne raised her voice in alarm, only for Mia to shake her head.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind. No matter how precious the item, no matter how closely you try to hold onto it, there will be a day... It may go missing, or it may break... but its time will come. Knowing this, the most we can do is to use it well, and thereby give it meaning.”

“Your Highness...”

Ludwig was overcome with emotion — a rarity for a normally stoic man such as himself. Moved deeply by Mia’s words, he looked reverently in her direction, from where he felt the venerable aura of a saint.

It was, of course, all in his head. Just for the record.

As everyone should be fully aware by now, Mia was no saint. Why did she decide to sell her hairpin, then? She had, in fact, a very sound but decidedly less saintly reason for doing so.

Hmph! I’d rather sell the thing than let those jerks take it from me!

The hairpin was, as a matter of fact, destined to be stolen from her during her capture by the revolutionary army. And not only was it stolen, it was stolen by a hooligan of a man, rude and violent and with entirely too much beard to be proper. Not that it’d be okay if she was robbed by a handsome fellow with a dashing crop of finely kempt hair, but anyway...

If it’s going to end up in the hands of someone like him, I’d rather give it up myself. At least I’ll be using it for my own sake.

Rest assured that Mia was calculating to the core. Also rest assured that Ludwig hadn’t the slightest idea.

“Your Highness’s benevolence shall not go to waste. Let it be known that I, Ludwig, shall personally ensure that this precious treasure be put to its fullest use.”

Selling the hairpin would ultimately be a drop in the ocean compared to the cost of the undertaking. Nevertheless, Mia chose to do so, and Ludwig understood exactly why.

The next day, Ludwig went around loudly proclaiming that Her Highness had forfeited a most treasured personal article for the sake of the people in the slums. It was, as he described, an act of utmost charity by the young princess. The masses were shocked and awed by the depths of Mia’s benevolence, and the act put all the other nobles in a position where they had no choice but to donate to the cause as well.

Twenty days later, it was decided that a large hospital would be built in the Newmoon District.

Chapter 14: Tea Party

On this day, Mia was attending a tea party under invitation from the daughter of one of the Four Dukes of the Tearmoon Empire, Emeralda Etoile Greenmoon. For girls of the nobility, tea parties were a status symbol. The successful invitation of a prestigious guest was a statement of the host's influence. In that sense, Princess Mia was in particularly high demand.

The tea party took place in a corner of a spacious garden, where the daughters of a great number of noble houses had gathered. Among them was the host, Emeralda. Her viridian hair flowed behind her, gentle and wave-like, as she turned to Mia.

"Speaking of which, Miss Mia, that was quite the bold thing you did..."

"Oh? Whatever do you mean?"

Mia took a sip of her black tea as she gave Emeralda a curious look.

"The slums, of course. I heard about what happened the other day," replied the Duke's daughter before letting out that most lofty of laughs. "Ohoho. But tell me something. I believe you gave away your treasured hairpin for the sake of commoners, yes? Whyever did you do such a pointless thing? Even Father was thoroughly perplexed by the news."

"Ah, that's what you mean..."

"At first, I'd assumed it to be a flight of fancy, but I can't help but wonder if there was some deeper meaning, especially considering it was you, Miss Mia. I've thought ever so hard, but in the end, I simply can't conceive of a reason..." she said, leaning closer and closer as she spoke.

Frankly, Mia wasn't very fond of her. Despite her constantly proclaiming herself to be Mia's best friend to everyone around her, she'd jumped ship faster than anyone else at the first hint of revolution. That was the kind of thing that got in the way of friendships. If it was up to Mia, she wouldn't even be here, but the constraints of social propriety had made it difficult to turn down the

invitation. Emeralda was, like it or not, the daughter of a powerful house that shared the emperor's blood. Consequently, Mia's goal for the day was to weather the proceedings using the least effort possible and to avoid stirring up any trouble. So she opted for a fairly perfunctory response.

"Whatever I did, I did following my heart. There's no deeper meaning to it than that."

Which was really just a more diplomatic version of, "What? I did it 'cause I wanted to. Got a problem with that, punk?"

Had she been speaking to Ludwig, it would have been necessary to choose her words more carefully. For just some young girls of the nobility, though, this was as much discretion as she was willing to spare.

"How splendid. You hold such compassion in your heart, Miss Mia."

"To be caring for even commoners... Such benevolence is beyond the likes of us."

As the girls at the table all took turns showering her with compliments, Mia mentally sighed to herself.

Oh, how I wish this would end already...

"It's been a long day, hasn't it, Milady Mia?" asked Anne as soon as they started heading home in their horse-drawn carriage.

"Indeed. My shoulders feel terribly stiff," answered Mia as she twisted her neck this way and that. Her joints crackled, eliciting a sympathetic look from her maid.

"I figured you wouldn't really feel at home in that kind of atmosphere... I was right, wasn't I?"

It wasn't that Mia didn't feel at home. If anything, that *was* home. She'd been brought up in that kind of atmosphere. As such, the question made her a little curious.

"You figured? What makes you think so?" asked Mia in a casual tone as she idly examined the various gifts she'd received.

"Because you're different, Princess Mia. You're not like those people."

Unprepared for the sudden gravity in Anne's voice, Mia's head was still filled with such frivolous thoughts as, "*My, this is ice candy. I love these. They taste so terribly good!"* while her maid's speech continued.

"I doubt people like them would ever bother to visit the homes

of the poor, much less spare sympathy or give away their own belongings. They're nothing like you," she said in a passionate voice.

"I-Is that... so?" stammered Mia, unable to look Anne in the eyes — those sparkling eyes filled with such honest admiration. After all, altruism was not *exactly* the main driving force behind Mia's actions. In fact, not a single thing she'd ever done was out of pure goodwill. There was something terribly uncomfortable about being praised so lavishly for something she didn't do. Anne's innocent and heartfelt trust weighed heavily on her conscience. In the end, she cracked, and her guilt manifested as an overwhelming need to do something nice.

"...Well, since I'm so generous, I have decided to bestow upon you a gift. You may have these."

She held out the ice candies she'd received.

"Really? Are you sure? These look really expensive!"

"It's fine. They're not especially rare..."

"Wow! Thank you so much!"

For a moment, Anne giggled with glee, but she soon fell silent. Her expression turned a tad wistful.

"Is something the matter?"

"Oh, it's just that... I was thinking how nice it'd be if I could share these with my sisters..."

"Ah, good point. In that case, how about we pay a visit to your home right now?"

"...Huh?"

"We'd better hurry, then. They're ice candies, after all. We wouldn't want them to melt before your sisters can try them, would we?"

"What? B-But— You... You can't just go to a commoner's home like that, Princess Mia. There's no way that's allowed..."

"My, but I thought you knew. Haven't you heard that your princess is a most willful young lady?"

And with that, Mia turned to the driver, leaving Anne at a complete loss for words.

Chapter 15: Princess Mia... Attains Enlightenment

Anne's home was located just outside the downtown area that surrounded the castle. It was an ordinary wooden house, small and unassuming, tucked away in rows of similar dwellings. Pretty little flowers dotted the yard, across which hung a line of newly washed clothes that fluttered gently in the breeze. It was a humble sight — not sophisticated by any measure — but it radiated the warmth of hearth and home.

"Princess Mia, please stay here in the carriage until I say it's okay to come in," cautioned Anne before hastily dashing into the house. A few minutes later, she reappeared with a middle-aged couple, both of whom looked a little pale.

"My, would the two of you happen to be..."

"I-It is an a-absolute honor to meet you, Y-Your Highness. I am Anne's father," said the man, his voice cracking nervously. He then introduced the woman at his side as Anne's mother.

In response, Mia gave her skirt a quick tug and curtsied.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Mia Luna Tearmoon. Your daughter, Anne, has been an absolute blessing. I'm terribly glad for her service," she said with a sweet smile.

"Y-You humble us with your words, Your Highness. Please accept our deepest gratitude for gracing our daughter with your royal favor."

"I-I fear we have nothing to offer Your Highness here, but..."

"Please, be at ease. The service your daughter provides is enough. I ask for nothing more. We're visiting today simply because we wished to bring you a gift." Mia gave them her best princess smile. She was very good at putting on a sweet front. "Now, Anne, could you show me to your sisters? Quickly, please."

She wanted to eat ice candies, and the thought of them melting was putting her on edge. Fortunately, the ceramic cup held eight candies in total — she knew because she'd counted. With that

many, there should be enough for everyone in Anne's family to have one and still leave some for her.

Phew, just enough! Good thing the Four Dukes don't skimp on their gifts!

She quivered with excitement as she imagined placing one of the delicate treats into her mouth. When she stepped into the guest room, however, she grew a tad concerned. Gathered in the rather small space were four children. The eldest was a boy, who looked just a little older than Mia. The others, three girls, looked younger than her.

"...Anne's brother and sisters, I presume."

Counting Anne, there were six young people here. With her parents, that made... Eight!

Phew. What a close call...

That meant after making the rounds, there'd be one last piece for her. At the same time, she'd have demonstrated her boundless generosity by freely sharing her treats with everyone present. Not only that, but Anne's impression of her as the kindhearted princess would also remain unscathed.

Feeling rather proud of herself for how everything had worked out so perfectly—not that she'd had anything to do with it—Mia went back to gleefully envisioning herself eating ice candies. As a result, she failed to pay attention to Anne's introductions of her family members.

"So, I'm really sorry, Princess Mia, but our second sister, Elise, has poor health and is always resting in her room at this time. I know she's supposed to come and greet you, but..."

"...Huh?"

Mia froze. There was one more person. Not only that...

"Wow! Really, Your Highness? Are you sure we can have this?"

"Thank you, Your Highness! Come on, Mom and Dad! Let's try it together!"

"Now, now. Behave yourself in front of the princess... I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness."

Faced with the smiling faces of Anne's family, Mia knew her fate was sealed. She didn't have the guts to demand a piece in front of Anne and risk ruining her image as the kind-hearted princess.

S-Stupid girls! Why couldn't you have put ten in, you cheapskates?! So much for the Four Dukes!

She decided to direct her frustration at the Dukes' daughters.

After subjecting them to a good round of verbal abuse in her head, she finally calmed down.

"I'm so sorry, Your Highness. I know that there's normally no excuse for her absence... Please accept my sincerest apologies..."

"What? O-Oh, uh, that's quite fine. I don't mind. It's my fault for coming on such short notice. Besides, if she's not feeling well, there's no point forcing her to come. More importantly, Anne, please have everyone try these already. It'd be a shame if they melted." She cast a final, wistful glance at the ice candies before continuing, "Ah, yes, and why don't we bring one to your sister in her room?"

To be absolutely clear, Mia wasn't saying that out of concern for the sick. She just couldn't stand the thought of something tasty entering other people's mouths and not hers. Staying any longer meant sitting there and watching everyone else eat. She'd need a heart of gold to not consider that torture, and hers only had a thin layer of gilding. It was time to make an escape.

As for how Anne interpreted her statement...

"Oh... Princess Mia..." she said, so moved that she had to take a few moments to gather herself before she could continue speaking. "You're so thoughtful. I appreciate your kindness. I really do. And I'm sure my sister will too. She'll be so happy to see you!"

"Ah. Well. That's nice to hear."

Compared to her young maid's heartfelt words of gratitude, Mia's reply was decidedly less passionate.

Chapter 16: The Unfinished Novel

"I see. So, your sister is called Elise?" asked Mia as she followed Anne up to the second floor.

"Yes. She's the same age as you, Princess Mia, but she has always been a little sickly... I only wish she were as healthy as you..."

Anne gave a sad smile.

"...I'm sorry to hear that she's in such poor health."

"Oh, but she's not actually ill or anything. Just sort of weak. Plus, thanks to you, my salary has gone up. Now, I can afford to have her eat lots of nutritious things, and she's starting to look more and more healthy," she said as she knocked on the door in front of them. "Elise, are you up?"

"Yes, I am. Is that you, Anne? You can come in," replied a quiet voice.

Anne opened the door to a small room. Its modest furnishings — nothing more than a wooden desk and a bed — were in stark contrast to Mia's own chamber, which was filled with all manner of things. On the desk was a row of books, all of which showed signs of considerable use. Books were costly items, so it was common for them to be reread more than a few times. What was not common was for them to be reread to the point of falling apart. Even less common was for every single book a person owned to be in such a state.

"I'm sorry I couldn't go down for the greeting, Sis..."

A young girl sat on the bed rubbing her eyes. She shared a lot of Anne's features, including a mop of messy red hair that was currently sticking out in all directions. Evidently, she'd just woken up.

"I guess the Princess left already... Oh, I wish I could have gotten a look at her..." she said before reaching for her glasses beside her pillow. As she put them on and looked through their somewhat comically large lenses, she froze.

"...Huh?"

She stared, mouth agape, at the person standing beside her sister.

"Hello. My name is Mia Luna Tearmoon, and I'm glad to be meeting the sister of my wonderful maid, Anne."

"Wh-Wha— But, um... H-Hello. I'm sorry, I'm not even dressed... Your Highness, I..."

"It's quite all right. Your name is Elise, right? I've heard about you. Please, relax."

Mia smiled as she placed a hand on Elise's shoulder and stopped her from trying to get up.

"B-But..."

"Didn't you hear her, Elise? Just stay put. Princess Mia has a heart of gold. She won't be bothered by a few lapses in protocol."

"Indeed. In fact, was there something amiss? I didn't even notice," said Mia, not missing a beat. After all, receiving praise was her forte.

For a while, they engaged in some enjoyable banter. She was particularly delighted when Elise declined the ice candy and said with a look of sincere apology, "It pains me to have to turn down such a generous offer from Your Highness, but I'm afraid of giving myself a chill."

As soon as she heard that, Mia immediately decided that she liked this girl. Not because of any particular trait, of course, but because she got her ice candy back. Beaming at the delicate treat returned to her, she was so happy that she almost started bouncing up and down.

"Isn't this great, Elise? I know you said how much you wanted to meet Princess Mia," said Anne, watching her sister with a gentle smile.

"My, you wished to meet me that much?"

"Yes! I, um... You see, I'm writing a story and..." Elise said, excitement creeping into her voice. She brought a bundle of papers over from her desk. Written across the very top page was a title. It read, "The Poor Prince and the Golden Dragon."

My, I remember seeing this title somewhere...

As she stared at the row of words, she slowly lost herself in her memories.

Her days in the dungeon were filled with tedium. There was, after all, very little to do there. Being dragged out to a kangaroo

court where everyone showered her with insults was, of course, a harrowing experience, but being stuck in a cell with nothing to do was equally agonizing.

One day, to help pass the time, Anne started telling her a story titled “The Poor Prince and the Golden Dragon.” It began with a prince who shared his wealth with the poor and needy, only to find himself in poverty after giving too much away. The prince then saved a dragon from a debilitating injury, and the two of them then went off on a series of exciting adventures.

It was a story unlike anything she had heard before. Fantasy novels were rare in the Tearmoon Empire, and Mia immediately took a liking to it. Ultimately, however, she never got to hear its ending, and the reason wasn’t because she was executed before she had a chance to.

It was because it didn’t have one.

The author — Anne’s sister — died in the famine before she could finish writing it.

When Mia stepped up to the guillotine, one of the deepest regrets she had was the fact that the story’s ending would forever elude her.

I’d almost forgotten.

Mia was immersed in her thoughts. Slowly but surely, her fate was changing. She didn’t know whether the famine would still strike. If it did, with Ludwig’s efforts, its effects might not be as devastating. Even so...

After leafing through the bundle of papers, she looked at Elise.

“This is a terribly interesting story. I like it very much.”

“Huh?”

Elise looked taken aback. She didn’t think Mia could have read through it so quickly.

“Elise,” Mia continued, paying no mind to the look of surprise on the girl, “I’d like you to become my court artist.”

“...Huh?!”

Chapter 17: The Princess Chronicles of Saint Mia

There existed a book entitled: *The Princess Chronicles of Saint Mia*; a self-proclaimed work of nonfiction, its contents were pure and unbridled fabrications that glorified Mia. The author of this work was the renowned writer Elise Littstein, who single-handedly established the fantasy genre in the Tearmoon Empire and pushed it to prominence. Employed as court author through Princess Mia's patronage, she was also sister to Anne Littstein, who served for countless years as the princess's personal maid-in-waiting.

The book began like this.

My first meeting with Her Highness came shortly after my twelfth birthday. At the time, I was a sickly child. Without even the strength to play outside with friends, I could but turn to writing. My stories — not novels, no, for they were far too crude to be called novels — served as an outlet for my desires and frustrations. They were an escape for an impoverished young girl who had little else in her world.

Her Highness performed no more than a quick skim of my scribblings before deciding to employ me as a royal author. Not only that, in those few short moments, she grasped the entirety of my story. I was left speechless by the sheer speed at which she read. It was a gift that defied all sense, bespeaking a brilliance that defied all description. It is my belief that this episode offered an early glimpse at the abundant genius of Her Highness.

Once again, to be absolutely clear, that was only Elise's interpretation. Misinterpretation, rather. In fact, it was straight up *delusion,* since there wasn't an iota of truth to what she wrote. Regardless, her book sold like hotcakes. In a way, it was perhaps a fitting sign of an empire in decline.

Granted, the book also ends up saving Mia's life... but we'll get to that later.

“Court artist... to Your Highness?”

Caught off guard by Mia’s sudden proposal, Elise could manage to do little more than blink.

The system of court artists involved a member of the nobility or royal family becoming a sponsor for an artist and supporting his or her livelihood. Gaining a good sponsor meant freedom from financial worries and the ability to focus completely on one’s creative work. It was the kind of mouth-watering proposition that every artist dreamed about.

Having been offered the best job a writer could possibly hope for, Elise shook her head.

“Please, I’d rather not.”

“Eh?”

Elise’s answer took Mia by surprise. She gave a puzzled frown.

“Why? I do believe it’s a proposition you stand to benefit from.”

As Mia’s court author, she’d have access to the Grand Library in the castle as well. It’d be far easier for her to do research that way...

“I don’t want you to favor me just because I’m Anne’s sister.”

“Elise! Are you out of your mind? How can you say that to the Princess?”

“I want to earn my success as a storyteller, not be gifted the role of a court author through my sister,” she said, a hint of indignant anger creeping into her tone.

Mia gave her a level look and said, “My, but I was under the impression that I *was* recognizing your talent.”

“You’re lying! There’s no way you could have read it that fast!”

“Miss Elise, if there’s one thing I’d like you to remember, it’s this: I *hate* lies,” said Mia, her voice taking on a firm edge. “I read your story, and I’m making this proposal because I enjoyed it.”

Then, she put a finger to her cheek and looked up at the ceiling, as if she was pondering something. A moment later, she spoke again.

“Ah-hah. Why don’t I describe for you what I like about your story! Let’s see... First, there is...” she said, turning her thoughts to that day in the dungeon when she’d first heard the story. She still remembered all the parts she liked, the scenes that left an impression on her, the things that made her laugh...

And then, she talked. She talked and talked, rattling off a long list of entirely subjective opinions about the story like those smug

armchair critics you all surely know well.

"...No way."

Elise's expression gradually changed. At first, it was mild interest. Then, it was genuine surprise. Then astonished wonder. Then... a baffled frown?

"Um, Your Highness...?" she asked timidly during a lull in Mia's encomium.

Mia raised an eyebrow at the perplexed look on Elise's face.

"Hm? Yes?"

"How come... you know about parts that haven't been written yet?"

"...Eh?"

The meaning of Elise's question hit her like a pound of bricks to the head.

Sweet moons! Oh, I just slipped up hard!

She sure did.

The version of the story that Mia knew was from a few years later. Obviously, it contained material past what was currently written.

It felt so terribly good to talk about it that I wasn't thinking at all about what I was saying!

Having realized that she'd made a royal blunder, she broke out in a cold sweat and started to panic. Unexpectedly, however, she was lent a helping hand.

"What's so surprising about that, Elise?" asked Anne, who seemed completely unperturbed. "This is Princess Mia we're talking about, you know? Once she's read a few chapters, she can guess where the story's going to go."

Clearly, Ludwig wasn't the only one who was suffering from terminal Mia Syndrome. Anne was right there with him. In her mind, the significance of Her Highness had inflated to ridiculous proportions. If the weather was nice, it was thanks to Mia. If it rained, then Mia was looking after the farmers and their land. Anne had, in summary, become a true-blue Mia fan.

"Right, Milady Mia?" she asked, beaming at the object of her adoration.

Mia nodded by pure reflex.

"O-Of course! Whatever you said, it's absolutely that!"

Absolutely what?! *What in the moons was she even talking about?!*

Even Mia could tell Anne's reasoning was nonsense. It was too

late to back off now, though. She had to run with it.

"And there you have it," she said, forcibly moving the conversation along. "Now, with that in mind, allow me to ask you again. Elise, I'd like you to become my court author. And when you do, make sure you finish writing this story."

"Your Highness... Anne..."

Elise looked from Mia to her sister. Faced with the pair's absurd logic...

"Thank you so much."

She cracked and gave in.

Thus did the Empire see the birth of yet another rabid Mia fan.

Chapter 18: A Winter Day's Promise

Winter in the Tearmoon Empire was cold. Snowfall was common, making the fireplace a treasured fixture of every household.

"Mmmfff... it's so cold..."

It was the last day of the year, and Anne was making her way down a palace hallway, her breaths leaving faint puffs of white in the air. Outside, snow was slowly descending on the frozen townscape. Many, if not most stores were closed, but work inside the castle could afford no pause. Her fellow maids were all busily tending to their usual tasks, and she greeted them with a quick hello as she passed by. Finally, she came to Mia's personal chamber.

"Excuse me, Milady. May I enter?"

"Ah, Anne. Please come in." Seeing the figure of her maid in the doorway, Mia put down her book and rose from her fireside chair. "How terribly cold you look. Come over here and warm yourself up."

"Yes, I'd appreciate that," said Anne as she walked over and lowered herself beside the fire. "Ah, this feels lovely. Thank you very much."

In the past, concerns over propriety and norms would have caused her to balk at such an offer. However, after she was reprimanded by Mia, who considered her reservation to be improper in and of itself, she'd learned to just comply gratefully. In return, she made a solemn promise to herself that she'd repay her master's goodwill with loyalty.

A comfortable silence descended on the pair as they luxuriated in the warm aura of the fireplace.

Has she grown a little taller? I wonder...

A fond smile crept over Anne's lips as she regarded the young princess. Sometimes, she couldn't help but see Mia as another sweet little sister.

"Say, Anne... Do you have a moment?" asked Mia all of a sudden.

Anne frowned at the strange question. Then she noticed that Mia's eyes kept wandering toward the ceiling as she fidgeted in her seat. Based on experience, she knew that Mia tended to display this kind of behavior when she wanted to ask some sort of difficult favor.

"Yes? What is it, Princess Mia?" she replied in a curious tone.

"Well, you see... Next spring, I shall start attending school."

"I'm aware of that. Congratulations. I wish you all the best in your studies."

Amongst children of the nobility, the rule was that school began in the spring of the year they turned thirteen. They would enroll in specialized institutions of learning where they would gain the knowledge and competence required to effectively rule their respective domains.

Anne already considered Mia a living saint. She could only imagine what a magnificent young lady her princess would become with a formal education. Though Mia hadn't even left yet, Anne was already looking forward to her return.

"Thank you, Anne. The thing is..." Mia smiled briefly before her expression clouded over. She remained quiet for some time. Then, as though she'd finally managed to muster the necessary resolve, she took a deep breath and looked up at Anne. "I'd like you to come with me. As my personal attendant."

"...Huh?" Anne stiffened in surprise at the question. "You want... me...?"

She had good reason to be shocked. Schools were a place for nobility, where future dukes, counts, and barons gathered and mingled. There, noble children developed the friendships and connections that would one day help them rule. Anyone who stepped foot into these hallowed institutions, which produced the very leaders of tomorrow, was expected to be on their best behavior. Clumsiness would not be tolerated.

Furthermore, the school that Mia would be attending wasn't even in the Empire. For a number of years henceforth, Mia would leave the comfort of her castle and spend her days in the dormitories of her school. During her time there, she was permitted to bring only one attendant, who would no longer be able to rely on any of the other veteran maids for help.

"Um, Princess Mia, I'm... overjoyed by your offer, but are you sure about this? About... me?"

The fact of the matter was that Anne wasn't a particularly capable maid. If anything, she was more on the clumsier side of things. Though she was well aware that Mia afforded her a great deal of trust and — to her deep gratitude — some degree of genuine affection, it always saddened her to know that none of it stemmed from her skill as a maid. As a result, she couldn't help but feel that Mia would be better off taking someone more capable and experienced than her.

Just then, she felt something warm engulf her cold palms. Looking down, she was surprised to find Mia's tiny hands wrapped tightly around them.

"Um, Milady, you shouldn't... My hands are cold, so..."

"Listen to me, Anne. I said that I want *you*."

"Princess... Mia...!"

Anne felt a wave of hot emotions well up inside. Mia had believed in her, offering her unconditional trust, kindness, and friendship. She'd given her so much. It was a debt that should, and must, be repaid. Moved to the core, Anne kneeled down right then and there.

"I'll try my absolute best, Princess Mia. I'll serve you with all my heart and soul."

Phew. Well, am I ever glad I got that sorted out. Now I don't need to worry.

Mia let out a sigh of relief.

Awaiting her at the school where she was headed were her two greatest enemies in her previous life. One was Tiona Rudolvon, an Outland noble who led the revolution against the Empire and would later be venerated as a saint. And helping her every step of the way was Sion Sol Sunkland, prince of the formidable Kingdom of Sunkland. These two people, who were directly connected to her gruesome fate at the guillotine, also happened to be her classmates.

Being near people like them without an attendant I can trust... Why, the thought alone is enough to keep me awake at night!

Content in the knowledge that she'd managed to avoid such a nightmarish scenario, Mia welcomed the New Year with a considerably lighter heart than before.

Chapter 19: To New Lands

In the middle of all the kingdoms and empires was a small country known as the Holy Principality of Belluga. Its holy nature came from the fact that it was the home country of the Central Orthodox Church, the religion which had been observed across the entire continent from days of old. Though it had no military power whatsoever, it nonetheless possessed an unparalleled amount of influence. The existence of a certain school within its borders was, in a way, a testament to its power.

Saint-Noel Academy was an elite school that gathered children of nobility and royalty from all across the land. Future rulers of neighboring kingdoms, who one would assume would be raised with the utmost care in their ivory towers, were instead all sent to one place where they received six long years of education. From this fact alone, the authority that the principality commanded was obvious.

And that was exactly where Mia was headed this spring.

"Wow! This is amazing!"

As Saint-Noel Academy came into view, Anne let out a cry of excitement. After a week of bumpy roads in the carriage, they were finally here. Mia wore a tired smile as she watched Anne marvel at the sights outside, her face pressed to the window.

"You're not going to last very long if you keep that up, Anne. Don't wear yourself out now."

"But, but, Milady! It's amazing! Look! The sea! It's the sea!"

"Actually, that would be a lake," corrected Mia as she followed Anne's gaze.

The small forest they were currently passing through was beginning to thin. Up ahead, the fresh green of their wooded road gave way to the shimmering surface of a vast lake. Known for its abundant natural beauty, over a third of the principality was taken up by the Noelige Lake. At its center was a large island, upon which stood the academy. With its beautiful white walls and castle-like

appearance, the building looked like it had popped straight out of a fairy tale. While she could understand Anne's delight at the sight...

I must admit, after seeing it every day for almost five years, it gets a little old.

After all, she'd already attended this school in her previous timeline. While she had no complaints about the academy's environment, it no longer roused any excitement in her.

"Wow..." said Anne as she let out a deep breath. "I'm honestly impressed by how calm you are about all this, Princess Mia."

Mia made no comment. She merely smiled back and then closed her eyes.

These next six years are going to be crucial.

Before coming to the academy, she'd carefully scrutinized her diary and contemplated how she was going to spend her time here. In the end, she decided to give herself two rules that she had to follow.

Rule number one: avoid danger at all costs. In particular, she was going to stay the hell away from anyone who'd had anything to do with sending her to the guillotine.

Rule number two: in the hopefully unlikely event that her attempted reforms in the Empire failed and that tragic revolution repeated itself, she was going to require a lot of help, which meant connections. To that end, she needed to make as many useful friends as possible.

She had it all figured out.

The most important thing is to stay away from dangerous people. Like the old saying goes: discretion is the better part of valor.

In her mind, she recalled the faces of her mortal enemies — those two hated people who'd brought about her ruin...

And thought nothing in particular of them. She didn't want to fight them, and it wasn't like she craved the sweet taste of revenge or anything. In fact, revenge didn't sound very sweet at all. It sounded like a lot of pain and suffering. Mia, being the lazy pacifist that she was, found neither of those appealing. This was a case in which her first rule applied: don't get close to anything dangerous. After all, if they never got to know her, they wouldn't have any reason to hate her, either.

With that said, to be completely unprepared would have been extremely foolish. If push comes to shove, I want to be ready. Which

means I'll need connections, and I'll have to make them as inconspicuously as possible. Who, then, should I approach first...?

Just as Mia was losing herself in her thoughts, the carriage came to a stop.

"Ah, bugger..." muttered the driver in a bitter tone.

"...Hm? Is something the matter?"

"Ah, Your Highness, my apologies. You see, I was about to move our carriage onto the boat that will get us to the island, but some other kingdom got in front of us and took our spot."

"Huh... And?"

"Normally, they should be allowing us from the Empire to go first. Allow me to go and put them in their place," said the driver as he rolled up his sleeves.

Mia sighed softly.

"...It's fine. I don't mind."

"B-But, what of the Empire's image..."

"I'm sure the Empire's image would be far better served by not squabbling over such trifling matters as the order in which we board a boat. Regardless, there's room for us both," said Mia, a hint of ire entering her voice.

The driver's attitude made her want to squeeze her own head in frustration. He'd intended to make a huge fuss over who reached the island first. It was so petty and frivolous and, honestly, embarrassing. But the most embarrassing part was the fact that in the previous timeline, Mia had done just that. To make matters worse, the affair had ended with her whole carriage falling into the lake. She couldn't help but cringe at the memory. All in all, it had been a terrible experience. She'd been wearing a stately dress that she was particularly fond of. Being stately, it had a lot of fabric, which soaked up a lot of water, which got very heavy, which meant she almost drowned... Even after she'd somehow struggled her way onto shore, she still had to endure a round of riotous laughter from all the onlooking students.

Remembering it was pretty painful, but watching her own humiliating actions being replayed before her was even worse.

How terribly embarrassing... If I could, I'd go and slap some sense into my stupid past self!

"A-Are you okay, Milady?"

"Oh, yes, don't mind me. I'm simply a little tired from our long journey," replied Mia as she opened the window.

The cool lake breeze felt good on her flushed cheeks.

Chapter 20: Squandering Sweat and Blood

A large and luxurious boat, capable of carrying two dozen horse-drawn carriages, floated on the surface of the lake. Anne looked up at the massive vessel and scratched her head.

"Huh... How come they don't just build a bridge to the island, Princess Mia? I mean, I get using a boat to carry people, but I feel like they don't have to carry the carriages too..."

"Apparently, they used a bridge in the past, but there were too many disputes over checking enrollment documents and confirming accompanying attendants."

Bridges, no matter how big or numerous they were, would always slow down traffic. They were fundamentally bottlenecks. Add to that the fact that the academy's students all arrived by horse carriage on the same day, and it was easy to see that congestion was inevitable. Furthermore, riding in those carriages were all sons and daughters of aristocrats for whom the concept of "waiting" was entirely foreign. A dispute between such people could easily result in some poor supervisor losing their head. But at the same time, increasing the width and quantity of bridges to the point where congestion wouldn't occur was also entirely unfeasible given how infrequently they were used.

"I heard that even after they started using boats to ferry the students, there was still an occasion when an argument broke out over the location of their assigned cabins."

The children of nobility and royalty were, in general, very proud people. They would not allow for those who came from families of lower or equal standing to occupy a cabin above their own. And it'd better not be bigger, either. The sheer number of preconditions that had to be considered when assigning cabins turned the whole process into a nightmare for whoever was in charge.

"How terribly asinine to be squabbling over such matters...

Hmph."

Mia conspicuously ended her statement with a scoff and a shrug to drive home the point that she would never even think of doing such a thing. The fact that she distinctly recalled a separate timeline where someone who looked and sounded exactly like her made a huge scene over whose carriage got loaded first was, in this case, completely beside the point. Also, her cheek definitely wasn't twitching.

Anne, of course, was oblivious to these details. Her mind was currently filled with thoughts such as *Wow, Princess Mia is so awesome* and *She's such a role model,* which only served to strengthen her loyalty toward her princess.

Eventually, they reached the harbor. Upon disembarking, they bade farewell to the carriage driver and the retinue of imperial guards who had accompanied them on their journey.

"Dear knights, your diligent escort has been greatly appreciated. You may return. I pray that you have a safe journey home."

The captain of the imperial guards bowed his head.

"Yes, Your Highness. We, and the whole of the Empire, wish you well. May God be with you in your new life at the academy."

Mia thanked him once again as memories of the past resurfaced. During the revolution, with most of the imperial army either fleeing or defecting, one group of knights had stayed firm in their duty. The imperial guards — the ones she was looking at right now — fought to the bitter end to protect her. In the end, not a single one chose life over loyalty.

In other words, they were exactly the kind of useful friends she needed to stay on good terms with. Therefore, she made sure to treat them with the utmost respect.

"Her Highness..."

"Did she just..."

Some of the guards shifted a little. A few had quivering lips. There was the sound of a sniffle. It wasn't their fault, really. Everyone got a little emotional the first time. After all, none of these knights had ever heard a word of appreciation from their princess.

Tasked with guarding the royal family, these were knights of exceptional skill. At times, they had to sniff out threats —

assassination attempts, for example — before they'd even occurred. However, no matter how faithfully they performed their task, at the end of the day, it was still a job. Though they might risk life and limb in the line of duty, their deaths and injuries were of no concern to the people they guarded. It was their purpose. They were doing their job. Nothing was wrong with that. Such was simply the way of things...

And yet, this young princess before them had expressed concern for their well-being. She said she would pray for their safe return. It wasn't much, but it moved them all the same. As they set off for the capital, Mia's words resounded brightly in their hearts, cementing their loyalty toward their tiny master.

"Now then... Let us head off as well," said Mia, turning her gaze toward the climactic stage that would decide her fate, Saint-Noel Academy.

The island in the lake where Saint-Noel Academy was situated contained all the facilities necessary to function as an independent town. It was, in effect, a college town. A multitude of stores lined the streets, offering everything from clothes and shoes to smithies, jewelry, and stationery. There was also no shortage of restaurants. Furthermore, in order to ensure the satisfaction of the island's high-class population, they were all of the highest quality. Which meant that for Anne, they all gave off an aura that was the opposite of welcoming.

"Woweee..." she said in a tone that was a mix between awe and aversion. "There's so many stores that look too scary to walk into..."

Mia giggled a little at her reaction.

"I agree, but that's only true for the main street. There are plenty of cheaper stores that are meant for the regular folks living on the island. The academy also runs its own store, which carries most daily necessities at very reasonable prices."

Oh, what a relief. I can go there to buy the things that I need for myself...

"As such, starting tomorrow, I'd like you to conduct a thorough survey of every store in this area."

"...Huh?"

"In particular, I want you to make a list of all the stores that carry items of decent quality at reasonable prices," Mia said as though it were the most normal request in the world.

“B-But, Princess Mia, what about your allowance? I thought you said you’ll be sent more than enough to cover everything you might need...”

“I will be. And you’re right. Some amount of expenses are indeed necessary to maintain the Empire’s image. However...” Mia glanced at all the fancy stores around her and frowned. “There is a time and place for such spending, and this is not it. My allowance is derived from taxes, and I’d rather not squander something that comes from sweat and blood...”

“Princess Mia...”

Anne’s voice trembled with emotion as she watched Mia softly whisper to herself.

“Sweat and blood must not go to waste. They absolutely must not...”

For Mia, it wasn’t a metaphor; how she used tax money had a direct effect on her sweat and blood — specifically, how much she’d end up shedding. Every coin wasted was another step toward the guillotine, and she had no intention of ever seeing that damn thing again.

“I’ll have half my allowance sent to Ludwig. I’m sure he’ll make good use of it.”

Just then, Mia stopped in her tracks.

“Princess Mia?”

“My... That’s...” she whispered, her gaze fixed on a figure in the distance.

Chapter 21: Princess Mia… Sows the Seeds

Among the students of Mia's year, there was one boy whose popularity trumped everyone else's. His name was Sion Sol Sunkland, Crown Prince of the Sunkland Kingdom and the object of every female student's adoration. His silver hair and cool, clear eyes rounded out his handsome features, which were further accentuated by a voice laced with honey. There was an air of composure to him, though he maintained a friendly, inviting manner. At the same time, he had a strong sense of justice. His grades were excellent, and his skill with a sword put most teachers to shame; among students, he was simply unequaled. Frankly, it would be strange for him to be any less popular, considering he was literally Prince Charming made flesh.

And Mia, bless her young, ignorant heart, had fallen madly in love with him. Rather, she'd fallen into what she'd thought was love but was perhaps something slightly less innocent. In her arrogance, she'd firmly believed herself to be Sion's only suitable companion. As the Crown Prince of Sunkland — a large kingdom with a rich history and long-standing traditions — it seemed obvious to her that the only person who could possibly be a match for him was herself, Princess of the equally-large and storied Tearmoon Empire. He was the man of her dreams, and as a result, she simply couldn't forgive the girl who *had* eventually developed a close friendship with him.

The girl in question, Tiona Rudolvon, was the daughter of a poor noble whose domain lay near the southern fringe of the Empire, where most of the land was used for farming. The fact that some country bumpkin from the middle of nowhere managed to win Sion's heart — when Mia herself had failed to, no less — was far too bitter a pill for her to swallow.

So, she took it out on the girl, teasing her and calling her names. When the other high-ranking girls bullied her, Mia joined in.

In the end, the harassment Tiona suffered at their hands — all the mistreatment that made her life a living Hell — became the driving force that pushed her to the forefront of history. Her leadership would eventually make her a symbol of the revolution. Hailed as a living saint, she spoke on behalf of the masses, channeling their despair and anger through her impassioned words. It was through her efforts that Mia would ultimately be put to death by guillotine.

How terribly foolish I was...

In her three years of dungeon life, she'd been subjected to more or less the same kind of abuse. After thoroughly experiencing the kind of suffering she'd inflicted on others, she came to understand an essential truth: you reap what you sow.

To bully is to be bullied. Such is the nature of the cosmos.

"Princess Mia... look at that."

Anne's voice pulled Mia back into the present. She turned to find Anne pointing toward a street corner where Tiona was surrounded by a group of girls.

Ah, of course.

It occurred to Mia that these were the exact same circumstances under which she and Tiona first met in the previous timeline. The girls, all of whom were daughters of powerful foreign nobles, had been harassing Tiona over some problem or another.

I do believe they were going on about how they'd been slighted by her attendant or something.

At the time, Mia had just happened to pass by, but she'd chosen to give Tiona the cold shoulder.

"What should we do, Princess Mia?"

"What should we do? Why, the answer to that is obvious."

She'd already figured it out in the carriage. The rule was to never get close to anything dangerous, and she had every intention of following it; at the same time, displaying any hint of hostility was absolutely out of the question. She didn't even want to go anywhere near them, lest she be labeled a bystander. These were the kinds of situations where staying neutral was exceedingly difficult; the bystander who does nothing, in the victim's eyes, was just enabling the bullies. The last thing she wanted was to get caught up in their dispute. She didn't want anything to do with them whatsoever.

Figuring her best option was to take a detour, Mia turned to

walk in a different direction. Just then, she felt a terrible chill run up her spine.

Wh-What in the moons was that?

She paused. Something didn't feel right. It was as if she were at a crossroads. There wasn't any clear hint of danger either way, but she couldn't help but feel a terrible misfortune awaited her if she made the wrong choice in this moment. She contemplated the strange sensation until a question popped into her mind.

I do wonder... why Anne decided to ask me that question?

It would make sense if they were at a literal crossroads and a decision had to be made whether to go left or right. However, in this case, Mia had absolutely no obligation to intervene. They both came from the Empire, sure, but that didn't mean she had to go help a stranger. And yet, Anne had posed the question. Despite all that, she'd turned to Mia and asked, "What should we do?"

Something told her she needed to do something about the Tiona situation, almost as if...

As if the decision had already been made...

Mia turned toward Anne. When their gazes met, she knew she was right. There was an absolute certainty to those eyes — an unqualified trust — that confirmed Mia's hunch. Anne's question wasn't "Should we help?"

It was "How should we help?"

For Anne, it was inconceivable that her beloved Princess Mia would refuse to lend a helping hand to those in need.

Th-Th-This is what it means to have to make an ultimate decision!

Trapped between a rock and a hard place, Mia was forced to choose between two equally unpalatable options. Should she help her archenemy or lose the trust of her most loyal subject?

After some hard thinking, Mia reached her conclusion; she couldn't afford to lose Anne's trust right now.

"I don't believe we have any other choice. Well then, let's do this."

"Yes, Princess Mia!"

After three years of dungeon life, Mia had come to understand an essential truth, or rather, she thought she had. What she didn't know was that she only understood half of it.

You reap what you sow.

Those words do indeed ring true, but the scythe cares not for

the nature of the grain. Should you sow the seeds of malice, then malice shall be your harvest. But should you sow the seeds of kindness...

Just as how bullying will be repaid in kind, so will acts of benevolence. However, the full scope of this truth was, at the time, beyond Mia's comprehension.

Chapter 22: Princess Mia used Verbal Assault! Tiona... Regained Health?!

“Excuse me, but what exactly are you girls doing?”

Her strides quick and steady, Mia waded into the crowd. There were three girls surrounding Tiona. She recognized them from the previous timeline to be the daughters of moderately prominent nobles from a number of moderately notable countries. The emphasis here is on “moderately.”

“Huh? And who,” said the leader of the trio irritatedly, “do you think you are, barging in—”

“Y-Your Highness...?”

Upon hearing Tiona’s surprised voice, the girl fell silent and the color drained from her face.

“Wh-What? Your Highness? You mean...”

“I do believe introductions are in order. As you may have suspected, I am indeed Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Mia gave her skirt a small tug and performed an elegant curtsy. Just then, sunlight streamed down onto her, imbuing her with a resplendent corona that dazzled the onlookers. It was as if she glowed with the glory of the Empire itself, and the girls almost prostrated themselves on the spot.

“Now, allow me to repeat myself... What exactly are you girls doing?”

“Um, well, we’re...”

Their faces grew paler by the second. As the princess of the mighty Tearmoon Empire, Mia was the one person they couldn’t afford to offend... And right now, she looked absolutely furious.

Indeed, Mia was on the verge of blowing her lid. The last thing she wanted to do was help her archenemy, and yet these girls had put her in a situation where she had no choice but to do just that. She glared at them with burning hatred.

“It seemed to me that you were behaving rather rudely toward

one of my subjects."

"N-Not at all. We were just thinking that, um, while she is imperial nobility, she comes from a noble house in the Outlands, so we were reminding her that any uncouth habits would not be tolerated in polite society—"

"Need I repeat myself once more?"

Seeing that she had no choice, Mia had accepted that she was going to have to play the savior. However, it was a reluctant acceptance, and Mia was an extremely sore loser. After all, she'd hated losing — her life to the guillotine, that is — so much that she was literally replaying the whole game. In an attempt to make herself feel a little better about this infuriating turn of events, she kept talking.

"You see, I love all my subjects, and I love them equally. Even the child of the poorest beggar shall not be denied my affection. No matter who they are, so long as they belong to the Empire, I will not condone any discourtesy toward them."

What she meant was, *I'm not helping Tiona because she's special or anything, 'kay?* Even if they'd been bullying some miserable beggar kid, she'd still have stepped in to help. In essence, she was really saying, *Listen here, you twit! I don't give three hoots about you! To me, you're no different from some miserable pauper, got it?*

Now, all of this might seem supremely counterintuitive. Considering she was stepping in to help anyway, it'd be far more productive for her to just commit to the effort wholeheartedly. However, that would require her to be a good sport. And being a good sport simply wasn't what Mia was about. Therefore, she turned to Tiona and smiled at her in triumph.

Hah! I just helped you. Can't say anything bad about me anymore, can you?

Alas, Mia's smile was destined to be gravely misinterpreted.

Tiona did not come from a particularly long line of nobles. Her grandfather was originally a leader of sorts among his fellow farmers. After successfully fighting off a group of bandits, he was awarded land and a title. He was therefore not born but inducted into the nobility — a nouveau riche of sorts. Worsening matters was the fact that the region where Tiona lived was incorporated into the Empire much later than the other regions. As a result, discrimination was rampant. Oftentimes, they weren't even

considered subjects of the Empire, never mind nobility. “Second-class citizens” was hardly the worst insult they’d ever heard. On bad days, they’d been called everything from “descendants of serfs” to “colony peasants.”

That was why she’d come to Saint-Noel. She’d studied her heart out, learned all the rules of polite society, and even taken up court fencing. Day in and day out, she pushed herself to improve, all so that she could outshine those noble girls who’d made fun of her. Or, at the very least, so she wouldn’t be a target of ridicule anymore. She wanted to be acknowledged as an equal — to look into their eyes and know that they saw someone whose blood ran just as red as theirs.

And yet, it’d barely been half a day since she’d arrived, and she was already staring at the shattered fragments of her hopes. Voices, their spiteful tone all too familiar, stabbed at her ears and at her soul.

Her world darkened. She bit her lip and lowered her gaze.

After coming all the way here, she had her answer; it didn’t matter how hard she tried. Nothing was going to change. Not for her, not for the Rudolvons, not for the people of her county. They’d never be seen as full citizens of Tearmoon.

Just as despair began to grip her heart, *she* appeared.

Like the flash of light that splits the darkness, Her Imperial Highness Mia Luna Tearmoon, noblest of nobles and Princess of the Tearmoon Empire, strode in and declared with resounding conviction that Tiona was “one of my subjects,” and that “No matter who they are, so long as they belong to the Empire, I will not condone any discourtesy toward them.”

...Huh?

For a long while, Tiona’s mind was blank. Mia’s words kept echoing in her mind, but their meaning eluded her. She wasn’t expecting any help, and never in her wildest dreams did she think she’d be acknowledged as a subject of the Empire as well. Then she blinked, and the figure of the girl before her came into focus.

Your Highness...

The girl’s smile was gentler and more tender than any she’d ever seen.

“...Ah.”

Something fell past Tiona’s cheek. She knew it was a tear. It wasn’t because all her hard work had paid off. It wasn’t because she

got back at her offenders. It was because of a promise — the assurance that no matter how powerless or insignificant a person she might be, the young princess before her would love and protect her as one of her own. After spending her whole life hounded by the urge to keep proving herself, for the first time ever, she felt... secure. Relief poured out of her in a stream of tears that, despite her best attempts to stem, simply refused to stop flowing.

Chapter 23: The Cast Assembles...

Sion Sol Sunkland was born the eldest son of the King of Sunkland.

"He who reigns over the people must believe firmly in fairness and hold justice close to his heart."

His father had often spoken those words to him when he was young... And they'd guided him ever since. To this day, he still lived by them. Royalty and nobility — those who reign over the people — must always take pride in their integrity and hold themselves to a standard such that they might be examples to their subjects. He'd always believed so, but...

As he grew up, there were things that he couldn't avoid seeing. He came to realize that not all nobles were the same, and that not all — not even most — of them lived by his father's principles. Even so, he'd held out hope for Saint-Noel Academy. It was, after all, a school where exceptional students of the nobility gathered. Many of them *must* be exemplary in their conduct and virtue. Surely, here, he'd meet plenty of people who were worthy of the seat of power...

And it was exactly because of his hopes that he was profoundly irked by the sight of students squabbling over something as trifling as the order in which they crossed the lake. Then soon after, he was forced to witness another scene that was deeply unbecoming of nobility. A noble girl who came to the defense of her attendant who'd blundered was being bullied by three other noble girls.

"...Hah. It's the same here, too."

"Unfortunate, yes, but the rot that festers among the royals and nobles of the land worsens by the day. Those who hold themselves to the principles of His Majesty and milord are but few and far between," said his butler, Keithwood, who shrugged and shook his head. His lips were curved into the same wry smile he always wore.

The two of them had been brought up together from childhood. A war orphan, Keithwood was taken in by the King as a child, who raised him like his own son. As a result, a tight bond formed between them, and they trusted each other like brothers.

“So, what’s the plan? Seems like a load of trouble to me. Are you going to help?”

“Obviously,” nodded Sion without the slightest hesitation.

The aggression was clearly one-sided. Leaving a girl to suffer such verbal abuse ran against the principles of justice. However, just as he was about to run over, something flashed across his view.

“Excuse me, but what exactly are you girls doing?” asked a young girl in a demanding voice. Her lightly fluttering hair glowed as if it had been soaked in the silver luster of the moon. With anger coloring every inch of her beautiful face, she declared herself to be Mia Luna Tearmoon.

“Huh... Princess Mia. The one they’re calling the Wisdom of the Empire... So that’s her,” he whispered as he watched from afar, mildly mesmerized by the girl. He found himself fascinated — even a little moved — by the way she’d boldly stormed into the scene. The audacity was admirable. The anger even more compelling.

When witnessing the oppression of the powerless, anger was the correct response. To Sion, the ability to feel righteous fury — to be justly angry in the face of evil deeds — was an essential quality for those who reigned over the people. However, how many people could truly empathize with the suffering of others? How many could go as far as to feel anger as if they themselves had been wronged? Even Sion, who had been ready to step in himself, would have done so out of a sense of duty. It came from the mind, not the heart. Faced with Mia’s genuine anger toward injustice, he felt that he saw in her the makings of a ruler who truly lived up to his ideals.

...It was, to be honest, a remarkably poignant example of why humans can never fully understand each other.

“Rumor has it that she’s made arrangements for a hospital to be built in the slums.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. I’ve been hoping to meet her ever since, but...” His gaze still fixed on Mia, Sion put his thumb to his chin. “Frankly, I was expecting to find a girl who’d lived a sheltered life and barely knows her golds from her coppers. Or at most, someone who possesses an abundance of mercy but little else...”

An incompetent but charitable ruler was far more preferable then one who actively spread turmoil through misgovernment. For this reason, Sion hadn’t thought too badly of Mia, but the scene he’d just witnessed profoundly changed his opinion of her.

“When she gave away the hairpin… She probably did so with a full understanding of the effect that action would have as well.”

A good-natured simpleton would not choose to charge head first into trouble, much less thwart the villainy therein. Sion was certain that Mia possessed wisdom befitting her imperial blood and held justice close to her heart.

“If her friendship is the only thing I gain from Saint-Noel, then it will still have been worth it coming here,” said Sion, his mood brightening visibly as his opinion of Mia underwent a bout of hyperinflation.

Meanwhile, Mia was in a terrible fluster. She’d felt rather good after delivering what she thought was a masterful jibe, but her triumph proved short-lived. After seeing Tiona break out in tears, she was immediately overcome by a wave of guilt.

I never expected her to cry so easily!

Mia never was much of a tyrant. If anything, she was sort of a wimp, and while her conscience was a perennial slacker, she wasn’t devoid of it either.

“A-Ah, perhaps I, uh… went a little too far? Yes? So, um, could you… stop crying? Please?” she stammered semi-incoherently before pressing her handkerchief into Tiona’s hands. “W-Wipe your face with this!”

And then, she fled the scene.

Chapter 24: Girls Talk

As soon as she entered her room in the girls' dormitory, Mia let out a deep sigh. After escaping the situation in the street, she'd spent the rest of her day acknowledging the greetings of scores of people who were drawn to her title, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire.

Ugh, greeting endless waves of strangers is so terribly bothersome. I wish I could just ignore them all.

While it might have seemed arrogant of her to find her celebrity status bothersome, her arrogance was ultimately dwarfed by her innate cowardice. With Anne by her side, watching, she simply didn't have the audacity to ignore anyone who showed up to courteously pay their respects. As a result, she ended up personally receiving each and every one of them.

"...I'm so terribly exhausted."

She kicked off her shoes and collapsed spread-eagle onto her bed in a most unseemly fashion. While she was aware of the inappropriateness of her conduct...

Who cares! I'm the Princess of the Empire, damn it! No one gets to tell me how to behave!

She was determined to maintain some element of independence. At least in her own inner monologue.

"You were wonderful today, Princess Mia," said Anne, noticing Mia's fatigue. "I'm sure everyone was really glad to meet you." She smiled appreciatively.

"Thank you, Anne. But it sure is exhausting."

"Would you like some tea? Or shall I prepare the bath instead?"

"The bath, you say..."

Her room was outfitted with its own bathroom. So long as she was brought hot water, she could take a bath whenever she wanted. There was also no need to be stingy, as water was an abundant resource here — so much so that the Principality had a full complement of water and sewage systems. If someone from the desert came here, they'd probably find it unthinkably decadent.

While Mia found the thought of settling into a hot bath and soothing her carriage-beaten body rather alluring, she quickly shook her head.

"No, that won't be necessary. In another hour, the communal baths will open. Let us head there instead."

The girls' dormitory was furnished with a hot spring facility that could be accessed during certain hours. For the sake of being able to stretch herself out and relax in a truly luxurious fashion, she chose to delay her gratification.

"More importantly, Anne, there's something I'd like to ask you..."

"Yes? What is it?"

Mia sat up on the edge of her bed and gestured for Anne to sit down on the adjacent bed as well. Their beds, on a side note, were identical in size and adornment. Normally, it would be unthinkable for a daughter of a noble house to live in the same room as her attendant, but Saint-Noel Academy was the exception. Here, many of the accompanying attendants were of prominent noble lineages themselves. To accommodate that, the school ensured that their rooms were suited for cohabitation by pairs of nobles. Anne, therefore, stared uneasily at her elaborately decorated bed before gingerly lowering herself onto it.

"Um... what would you like to know, Princess Mia?"

"I need your advice on something..."

"My advice...?" asked Anne with a perplexed frown.

"Yes. It's an important matter..."

"An important matter..."

Anne gulped audibly as she waited for Mia to reveal what was undoubtedly an issue of grave importance.

Mia took in a deep breath, held it for a second, and let it out. Then, she looked Anne in the eye and asked, "What's the best way to make an impression on the man of your dreams?"

"...Huh?"

In the previous timeline, Mia was certain that she and Sion would become a couple. It seemed to her that as the renowned Princess of the mighty Tearmoon Empire, the only person worthy of her hand was the Sunkland Prince. She figured the opposite was true as well. Consequently, her stance toward Sion was always *feel free to ask me out if you're so inclined*. It was like that during the

dance party, it was like that during the evening gala, and it was still like that on the day before the holidays. Every time, she'd go up to Sion and do some sort of *feel free to ask me out* routine. It was, needless to say, supremely annoying. Even present-day Mia had more or less clued in to the fact that her previous behavior was maybe, *just maybe*, a terrible mistake. It was a sign of maturity. Mia had taken a big step forward. It might not have been a giant leap for mankind, but it was certainly a big step for Mia.

Of course, her reasoning had been *it's all because Sion has a terrible personality!* Her time in the dungeon, however, had planted the seeds of doubt in her mind, which sprouted into tiny saplings of common sense. Eventually, it occurred to her that *maybe I was at fault in some ways as well?*

Currently, Mia still had absolutely no intention of actively courting Sion's affection. Still, she did need to make enough connections to save herself from the guillotine, and the first and most important connection was, of course, one's lover or spouse. To that end, she figured she'd ask Anne if her approach to dating was wrong, but...

"Princess Mia... Who taught you to act like that?" asked Anne after hearing Mia's story. Her face was rigid save for one cheek that twitched intermittently.

"What do you mean by 'who'?"

Mia was about to answer "Me, I suppose" when Anne grabbed her shoulder.

"Listen, Princess Mia. Everything you just said... It's all wrong! I don't know which bigwig noble daughter you asked, but nobody is going to talk to someone who's looking down on people all the time."

"I-Is that so?"

"It is so. Granted, you *are* the Princess, so there are probably people who will still go out with you, but they're after your influence and power. It's not because they like you as a person. And you wouldn't want to be with people like that anyway. They don't deserve you," she declared in an assertive tone. "Now, with that out of the way... Who are you going after? Let's discuss strategy!"

Anne's eyes glowed with excitement.

Chapter 25: The Secret to Beauty

"What a wonderful bath this is!"

An eager Mia arrived at the communal baths just as it opened. The bathing facility in Saint-Noel's girls' dormitory used water extracted from a natural hot spring deep in the ground. Standing in the bathing area with an expansive tub filled to the brim with steaming hot spring water and absolutely no one else in sight, Mia beamed her pleasure.

"...I wonder if this is what heaven feels like."

Anne couldn't help but giggle at the sight.

She really does love her baths, doesn't she?

Bathing was a surprisingly uncommon practice in noble circles. Very few people ever partook in it. Part of the reason was the fact that the scarcity of volcanoes on the continent made natural hot springs rare. In order to soak the entirety of one's body, a sufficient amount of water had to be both transported and heated, and few nobles found the effort to be worthwhile. The prevailing opinion among them was, "What's wrong with just wiping yourself off?"

If anything, it was the sweat-soaked working people who were fond of bathing. Unlike nobles, who never lacked for entertainment, commoners had little to look forward to in their days. The few public bathhouses that dotted the city were, therefore, widely enjoyed by the masses as one of their few sources of recreation. Even among the Empire's frequent bathers, however, Mia was widely known to have an unparalleled love for baths. Though she rarely indulged in extravagance, bathing was the one luxury that she allowed herself. Considering she had her bath filled and heated on a daily basis, her obsession became a popular talking point among her maids. She hadn't always been this way, though. In the previous timeline she had no such infatuation. Her three years in the dungeon, however... had changed her.

During her time as a captive, she was only allowed a barrel of cold water once a week. After three years of this she'd developed an *intense* yearning for a hot bath. But no matter how many times she

asked, her pleas fell on deaf ears. Ultimately, the only warm bath she would take was at the guillotine in a pool of her own blood. After being reincarnated she wanted to bathe on a daily basis. Even though she knew that blind indulgence would lead her straight back to the guillotine, her love for bathing was the one desire she couldn't suppress.

At first, Mia's request had left Anne baffled. She couldn't understand why a princess like her would long for an activity that was considered to be so... common. Her doubts, however, disappeared after she witnessed the pleasure Mia derived from lounging in the bath, and she started scouring the town for ways to improve the bathing experience. Seeing it as a chance for her to repay her master's kindness, she searched for popular bath herbs, procured water from the few hot springs in the area, and did whatever else she could to create the perfect bath environment.

The result of all this was that over time, Mia acquired a number of things, such as tender, healthy-looking skin that glowed and smooth, flowing hair that had a beautiful luster. She, however, had no idea. So long as she enjoyed her bath everyday, she was satisfied, and thus she remained none the wiser. The Empire's social circles, however, certainly did take note, and unbeknownst to her, a steadily growing number of admirers had begun to liken her beauty to that of the moon goddess.

I must say, I sure get a lot of comments about how my skin is pretty and my hair is beautiful these days. I wonder why...?

Such was the extent of her own obliviousness.

"All right. I'm going to wash your back for you, Princess Mia."

"Yes, go ahead."

Anne proceeded to carefully scrub Mia's back, taking care to check the condition of her skin.

Hm... she thought, *her skin feels a little rough. It must have been the long journey.*

Fortunately, the spring water used in this bath was said to be good for relieving fatigue and revitalizing dry, damaged skin. With a dab of herbal soap and a massage, followed by a nice long soak, her skin should be back to prime condition.

Still, I wonder who the person is that Princess Mia wants to approach?

Though Mia had left the question unanswered, Anne's curiosity did not wane.

I thought for sure she liked Mr. Ludwig, but—

Anne shook her head.

Regardless, my job is to take perfect care of her so that every man who sees her will find her irresistible. Let's see, what's next...

After washing Mia's body, she started brushing through her hair.

No split ends? Check. Volume and shine? Check.

"All right. I'm done, Milady Mia," said Anne with a satisfied nod.

"Thank you, Anne. You always take such good care of me."

Mia turned around with a pleased smile on her face but then frowned as though remembering something.

"Hm... Ah-hah! That's it! I should wash your back for you from time to time," she declared with a grin.

"Wh-What? No way! You're my master, Princess Mia! I can't possibly have you wash my back!"

"Please. Enough with the modesty. It's not like anyone is watching, and I'm sure you're tired as well. Consider it thanks for taking care of me every day."

To Mia, Anne was an invaluable ally and a loyal subject. Even more importantly, though, she was the one who stayed by her side until her final moments — the one to whom Mia owed so much. It was a priceless debt that she knew she could never repay.

She pushed Anne down onto the seat and, disregarding her continued objections, quickly circled behind her and began scrubbing her back.

"There we go. Nice and clean now. Let's jump in, then."

Just as Mia was about to step into the bath, she heard a soft laugh behind her.

"Gosh, you two are such good friends, aren't you?"

Chapter 26: The Daughter of the Duke of Belluga

Even at Saint-Noel Academy, which gathered the sons and daughters of powerful nobility from all across the land, there were few who could intimidate Mia. The Tearmoon Empire was one of the two most powerful countries on the continent. As its Princess, Mia's influence was without equal. There were only two exceptions. One was Sion, Crown Prince of the Sunkland Kingdom. The other happened to be standing right in front of her.

"Ah..." said Mia as she immediately straightened her posture. "Miss Rafina."

Rafina Orca Belluga was the eldest daughter of Orleans Belluga, ruler of the Holy Principality of Belluga where Saint-Noel Academy was situated. "Principality" referred to a country ruled not by a king or emperor but by a duke. Highly lauded nobles or those of the royal lineage with great achievements to their name could, with special permission from the king, be granted independent sovereignty over a small domain. The vast majority of principalities in this world were formed in such a manner, which meant that a princess of a mighty empire, such as Mia, had little reason to fear them. However, the Holy Principality of Belluga was the one exception to the rule.

The Duke of Belluga belonged to no royal family, nor was his domain a protectorate of some larger power. The reason the country chose to be referred to as a "Principality" was that its people saw God as their king. The duke's authority was bestowed upon him by God, and he governed in His place. Consequently, the Duke of Belluga was unique in that he was not only the country's political head but also a priest. His daughter Rafina assisted him in the various religious proceedings this duality entailed, through which her name naturally rose to prominence. In fact, she was known throughout the neighboring kingdoms as a saint. Unlike Mia's sainthood — the validity of which was both debatable and limited

to certain areas or even individuals within the Empire — Rafina's was the real thing.

Mia remembered the girl to be fourteen, making her about two years older than Mia. From the day Mia came to Saint-Noel, Rafina had been its student council president, making her a central authority figure within the academy and one who commanded unparalleled influence. She was the kind of person Mia couldn't afford to take lightly. In fact, Mia would never even dream of taking her lightly, because in all honesty, she was *terrified* of her.

"I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Rafina. I'm—"

"Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire. The pleasure is all mine. I've heard quite a lot about you."

This short exchange left Mia in shock. It took her a few seconds to process the fact that Rafina knew her name. In the previous timeline, Mia was the one who'd approached Rafina. Drawn by the power the Duke's daughter wielded, she'd had every intention of befriending the girl. Sadly, this never came to pass. It didn't matter how many presents she sent or how close she sat to her during tea parties. She tried her absolute hardest, but in the end, no friendship ever bloomed between them.

Worse yet, Rafina never even bothered to remember her name. Whenever they met, the girl's frigid gaze would make Mia feel worthless, as if her very existence was a waste of time. Eventually, those dispassionate eyes bore their way through Mia's damaged ego and scarred her soul. In the end, she was left with nothing but the feeling of cold, hard dread whenever she thought of the girl.

And now...

H-How does she of all people know my name?!

As Mia stood in silent, motionless surprise, Rafina smiled gently at her.

"Please. This is no place to practice your posture. You'll catch a cold. Come, let's enjoy a bath together."

At Rafina's prompting, Mia discovered that she was indeed starting to feel a little cold.

Still, this person suddenly acting so friendly toward me is a little scary.

"W-Well," said Mia, not entirely letting down her guard, "if you say so..."

Just as she put one foot into the water, something occurred to her. Anne was just as likely to catch a cold, but with Rafina

watching, she couldn't possibly have her share the same bath as them. The only option was to have Anne return to their room, but that would leave her alone with Rafina.

N-Never! That would be terrifying!

For comparison, in the previous timeline Mia had been twenty years old, and she retained the mindset and memories she'd had then, despite the age she appeared to be now. Presently, Rafina was fourteen years old. In other words, Mia was dealing with someone who was, relatively speaking, just a little girl. However, Mia's wimpiness struck again, and she couldn't help but tremble in fear before the aura of prominence that Rafina exuded. Truly, her cowardice knew no bounds. With her back against the wall, she struggled to find a solution to her dilemma.

"Your maid can feel free to join us if she'd like," said Rafina, causing Mia to spin toward her in disbelief. "Here, where we've shed both clothes and class, there are no princesses or nobles or commoners. Only people — equals who have come to share in the pleasure of a bath. Wouldn't you agree, Princess Mia?"

"Absolutely! I couldn't have said it better myself!" exclaimed Mia, who was more than glad to take her up on the offer. "Well, Anne, you heard Miss Rafina! Come on! Over here!" She urgently tapped the spot beside herself.

"B-But..."

Anne hesitated at first, but after Mia grabbed her hand and started pulling, she gave up and followed her in.

"Okay, there," Anne said, reluctantly lowering herself into a corner spot.

"Don't be silly. You're barely in the water there. Come closer."

Not to be denied, Mia proceeded to grab Anne's arm and drag her over. Their antics elicited a soft laugh from Rafina.

"You two really are such good friends."

"Of course. Anne isn't just my friend. She's my right hand and confidante."

The intended nuance of her statement was *It's going to be two versus one in a fight, so you'd better think carefully. And don't think she'll side with you just because you're a big deal. My right hand isn't going to betray me.*

"R-Right hand and... confidante?"

Meanwhile, Anne was on the verge of tears. Though she'd devoted herself heart and soul to serving Mia, she'd never once

thought herself to be an excellent maid. She figured she was more on the clumsy side, if anything. Mia's remark, therefore, moved her to the core. Those words were more than enough for her to feel that it was all worth it.

Ignorance, sometimes, truly is bliss.

Then again, Mia really did mean it when she called Anne her right hand and confidante. In this case, even if Anne discovered what she was actually thinking, maybe she'd get off with just losing a bit of saint cred...

"The Wisdom of the Empire indeed," said Rafina with a giggle. "I see that your epithet is well deserved."

The display of intimacy between princess and maid had brought a smile to Rafina's lips.

Chapter 27: An Army Ten Thousand Strong

Mia sat in the bath, the water up to her shoulders, feeling the heat sink into her body. Just as a comfortable haze began to settle in her head, she heard Rafina speak.

"By the way, Princess Mia, were you aware that there will be an entrance commemoration party the day after tomorrow?"

"An entrance commemoration party? I don't believe so..."

Mia frowned perplexedly. She'd never heard of such a thing, and she didn't remember attending during the previous timeline. She wondered why, though not for very long — she got her answer immediately.

"Haven't you heard? We're having a dance party to welcome the new students. I thought for sure someone would have already asked you to be their dance partner."

The second she heard "dance," a jolt ran up Mia's spine.

Ah-hah! I remember now! What a terrible time that was! I'd wiped it from my memory!

In the previous timeline, Mia had believed that she and Sion were destined to be together. As such, she figured Sion would be the one to ask her to the dance party, and the gossip she heard from those around her only strengthened that belief. This, of course, led to tragedy. After all, her supposed dance partner had absolutely no intention of taking on said role. On top of that, because she'd gone around spreading the word beforehand, no one else asked to go to the party with her. By the time anyone realized this, the party was half over. A few familiar faces did eventually come by and, with awkward smiles, invite her to participate. Her pride, though, couldn't bear the hint of pity in their eyes. In the end, she spent a long, lonely day in her room commemorating her matriculation by herself.

N-Never again! I refuse to go through anything like that again!

Fortunately, this time she hadn't lied about going to the dance

with Sion. Other people would ask her... They should. They had to.

Th-They are, right? Please, tell me they are—

Mia caught herself just as she was about to pray to a higher power. She quickly shook her head.

No. This kind of weak attitude won't do. I need to be more assertive. This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make these life-saving connections!

Mia took a moment to reaffirm her two objectives. The first was to not associate with people who were dangerous. The second was to intimately associate with people who would help her. Admittedly, the first was already looking pretty shaky, but the second one looked to be off to a good start. She had to make the most of her opportunities.

There had been a time when Mia wished to win the affection of Sion Sol Sunkland, whom she considered to be the man of her dreams. He was a handsome fellow with a charming smile, after all, and Mia was all about the looks. Furthermore, his skill with the sword was peerless; even older students couldn't hold a candle to him. During the swordsmanship contest, he'd fought boldly against an opponent far bigger than him. The rest of the time, he radiated kindness and composure. All in all, he was simply *flawless*.

...Or so Mia had thought. Now, she knew how wrong she'd been. However indirectly, he was the reason she'd been brought to the guillotine. Having seen through his perfect persona — or so she believed, anyway — she knew him to be a fake. However, there existed a more fundamental issue than whether or not his character was genuine; taking a crown prince as a husband was, first and foremost, an impossible proposition.

Being the sole heir to the imperial throne, Mia couldn't possibly leave her Empire to be wed to someone. Similarly, the Sunkland Kingdom couldn't send Sion over to be her husband either.

If anything, I should be aiming for second princes, or younger even. People who don't have much of a chance at the throne.

As she was considering her options, someone came to mind. While not as powerful as the two greats — Tearmoon and Sunkland — among the medium-sized kingdoms, there was one that was relatively large and boasted a fairly substantial military. In addition, though a little far, it just so happened to be situated on the opposite side of Sunkland, creating a geographic sandwich of sorts. It was named the Kingdom of Remno, and to Mia's great fortune, its second prince, Abel Remno, was her classmate. If she

could wed Abel — or at least establish a relationship with him — when Sunkland mounted its invasion, she'd be able to ask for reinforcements. That way, they might be able to defeat Sunkland with a pincer attack.

I was planning to approach slowly after school started, but it seems like I have no time to dawdle!

After leaving the communal baths, Mia quickly made her way back to her room. As soon as the door was shut, she turned to Anne.

"Time for a strategy meeting. Anne, I need relationship advice. Don't hold back. Tell me everything you know. I want full-scale mobilization."

Upon hearing this order, Anne immediately stood to attention.

"Understood, Princess Mia. You have my full commitment. With your permission, I shall provide you with every last piece of knowledge I have."

Seeing her maid's enthusiastic response, Mia nodded with satisfaction.

Unbeknownst to her, the "knowledge" that she was counting on was entirely based on the romance novel Anne's sister had written. In other words...

Not once did she suspect that Anne — five years her senior — was a complete novice at relationships who had never herself been in love before.

"How promising," she said, completely unaware of her terrible misconception. "With you at my side, Anne, I feel as though I've gained an army ten thousand strong!"

An army ten thousand strong indeed, but little did she know... What it had in numbers, it lacked in substance.

Chapter 28: Wisdom and Strategist and Council of Love

“I propose the method of dropping something.”

“...Huh?”

Mia blinked a few times, baffled by the sudden proposition. While she scratched her head, wondering what possessed Anne to make such a strange remark, her interlocutor continued, wagging her finger in that way teachers did when preaching to children.

“You see, Princess Mia, people need a reason to get to know each other.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

What Anne said was true. Starting a conversation with a complete stranger out of the blue was difficult. A great deal of courage was required to do so. For Mia, who was particularly chicken-hearted, it was an extremely tall order. Complicating matters was the fact that it was a dance party, for which boys were normally the ones who did the asking. Among noble circles, it was widely accepted that girls were asked to dances, and their efforts should be focused on making themselves sufficiently appealing to attract such requests. Should a girl ever take the initiative and ask a boy, she might quickly find herself the victim of much gossip about her shameless and uncouth behavior. Therefore, in order for Mia to be asked to the dance, she needed to first stage a scenario in which she and her target would naturally engage each other in conversation. That would allow them to become acquainted with each other, making it easier for the crucial request to occur.

Of course, they could remain completely unacquainted and he still might ask her to the dance. The possibility certainly existed in theory, especially considering there were boys who preferred to remain free agents until the day of the party, when they’d go around asking whomever struck their fancy. However, this was not applicable to Mia — no one would dare approach the Princess of the Empire on a whim. In addition, her change of heart was only a

very recent event. Though some people in the Empire had begun to refer to her as “Saint” and “The Wisdom,” only neighboring kingdoms with well-established intelligence networks would know anything about this. To most of her classmates, her reputation remained unchanged, and considering she was known to be a selfish, arrogant princess who flaunted her power in the worst ways, people probably weren’t lining up to be her dance partner. Therefore, she needed to make use of what limited time she had left to convince people that she wasn’t a terrifying egomaniac.

...Easier said than done.

“And that’s where dropping something comes in. Imagine this. The gentleman you’re interested in is right in front of you. You’re walking past him and, all of a sudden, something just... slips out of your hand and falls to the ground. What do you think would happen then?”

“Ah-hah. You’re right. If it looked like I accidentally dropped something right in front of him, he would have no choice but to pick it up.”

“Exactly. And in the process of saying thank you, you just casually mention the dance and ask him if he has a partner. If not...”

“Hm. So the idea is to create an opportunity for conversation that will naturally lead him to ask me to the dance... How terribly clever,” said Mia, deeply impressed by the tactical brilliance on display.

She had no idea her confidante was capable of devising a scheme of such meticulous detail. All sorts of descriptors she’d never before associated with Anne began to flash across her mind: dependable, master strategist, should be in charge of all the Empire’s armies...

“If he happens to be a little on the dense side, then you can ask him to the dance, but phrase it as an expression of gratitude for his courteousness.”

While it was generally taboo for the girl to do the asking, framing the request as a form of thanks should shield her from being seen as shameless. Offering someone a gift for no apparent reason would be seen as cheap ingratiation, but doing so as repayment for a previous favor carried no such scorn. In fact, in the latter case, not doing so would be deemed impolite.

“Also, you can subtly draw attention to your feminine charms

through the thing you drop. I recommend a nice little handkerchief, for example. It shows you have good taste."

"Amazing, Anne. You are absolutely amazing..."

Before she knew it, Mia was applauding Anne's proposal. The more she heard, the more she came to appreciate the masterful perfection of Operation Handkerchief Drop. What she didn't realize, of course, was that the entire operation was lifted step-by-step out of a story Anne's sister had written. And how could she? After all, the story that Anne drew from was much older than the one Mia was reading. It was one of Elise's earliest from back when she'd first started writing stories, filled to the brim with dreamy situations that reflected the fancies of a young girl for whom romance yet remained solely within the realm of imagination...

For Mia and Anne — two romantic amateurs who couldn't tell the difference between fiction and reality — nothing seemed particularly off about this.

"All right. Let's do this," said Mia. Slowly, she rose with a great sense of purpose as she prepared to carry out their masterful plan to drop a handkerchief.

Chapter 29: Operation Handkerchief Drop

Between the boys' and girls' dormitories of Saint-Noel was a beautiful courtyard known as the Garden of Water. Being in water-rich Belluga, it boasted a large fountain and many watercourses. It was further adorned by a lavish variety of colorful flowers and exuded a thick aura of romance. Many a pair of students had stepped in as friends and left as sweethearts.

What a perfect place to stage an accidental encounter! thought Mia with a devious smile as she tightened her grip on the handkerchief she'd brought.

It was the day after she'd met Rafina, and she was sitting on a bench in the aforementioned courtyard. Through intelligence gained by Anne's reconnaissance, she'd learned that Abel would soon pass by this spot. As such, she'd pre-emptively moved into position to await his arrival.

She also happened to be wearing the academy's official uniform, which consisted of a classy blazer and an elegant pleated skirt. Both pieces were brand new, and their pristine whiteness perfectly complemented her refined beauty. There was an almost divine quality to her quiet figure, motionless save for the gentle fluttering of her hair. In that moment, she was indeed the Saint of Tearmoon.

On the outside, anyway. Her motivations were far less pure.

For some time, she sat alone, listening to the gentle burbling of the fountain. Then, amidst the steady percussion of falling water, she heard something else — footsteps. Her eyes shot open.

He's here!

With her prey sighted, Mia let out a quick breath and stood up. She began walking, making sure to position herself just a little in front of Abel. Every few seconds, she glanced behind her, looking for just the right moment...

Now! Commence the drop!

She released the handkerchief. It fluttered gently through the air before descending to the ground, landing right at his feet. Seeing that her aim was true, Mia kept her composure, but in her mind, she was roaring with triumph.

What technique! What precision! I handled that perfectly! And now, here he comes!

Anticipation quickened her pulse as she waited to be called. She slowed down her pace so he could catch up more easily. She kept walking, and waiting, and walking, and waiting, and... nothing happened.

How terribly strange.

Craning her neck to assess the handkerchief's situation, she found it still in the same place it had landed. Stuck on a blade of grass, it fluttered uselessly in the wind, lonesome and ignored.

H-How come he didn't pick up the handkerchief?!

This time she turned all the way around to look at Abel, only to find him speaking to a girl beside him.

"Is something the matter, my dear lady?" he asked her glibly.

As it turned out, Mia had forgotten a very important fact: between a dropped handkerchief and a girl in need, Abel would go for the girl every single time! And then he'd try to get all friendly with her! Indeed, Abel Remno was fundamentally a playboy. He was handsome, but also shallow and pretentious. Woefully prone to delivering cheesy pickup lines.

That, however, was not the end of her misfortunes.

"Hm? What's this...?"

In one graceful motion, another boy reached down and picked up the handkerchief. Bringing it up to his eyes, he observed it for a moment. His beautiful silver hair and vexingly striking features marked him to be Mia's archenemy, Sion.

"Did anyone here drop a handkerchief?" he called to the people around him.

"Gah! Y-Y-You!" she muttered angrily under her breath as she gnashed her teeth.

She had to get out of here. Her first and foremost goal was making sure Sion and Tiona did not acquaint themselves with her. Under no means could she allow any communication to occur between them, or she'd be handing them her head on a platter! Retreat was her only option. Feigning disinterest, she spun around and started walking away. Just then...

“Ah, that belongs to Princess Mia.”

Her other archenemy, Tiona Rudolvon, joined in the attack.

“I just borrowed one of those yesterday,” she said as she ran up to Sion. “It looks the same, so it has to be hers.” She took out her handkerchief, which had been carefully washed and cleaned, and showed it to him.

The handkerchiefs Mia used were crafted by royal artisans. In their quest to please their beloved princess, they made full use of their expertise, embroidering the sides with intricately-patterned lace. As a result, her handkerchiefs were uniquely identifiable and, in this case, undeniable proof of her ownership.

“Ah! There she is! Princess Mia!”

D-Damn it, girl!

Realizing that escape was no longer an option, she finally resigned herself to her fate. She turned around gracefully and patted her uniform as if checking her pockets.

“My, you’re quite right. It would appear that I’ve dropped it by accident,” she said with a smile. “Thank you so very much for letting me know.”

“I see. So this belongs to Her Highness Princess Mia,” said Sion as he regarded the handkerchief. Then he walked up to Mia, pressed his hand to his chest, and lowered his head in a show of respect. “I am Sion Sol Sunkland, Prince of the Sunkland Kingdom. I believe this is the first time we’ve met, Your Highness. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“My, how terribly courteous. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon,” she replied, giving her skirt a quick tug in a mini-curtsy.

She’d intended to take the handkerchief, say thank you, and then get the hell out of there, but just as she turned to leave...

“I must say, what a fine coincidence this is. I’ve been meaning to ask whether Your Highness has decided on a partner for tomorrow’s dance party?”

A chill ran up her spine.

“If not, then I’m of a mind to nominate myself for the role.”

How? Why? What in the moons is even happening right now?!

Faced with a radiant smile that would make any other girl weak in the knees, Mia felt nothing but the terrible urge to scream her frustration at the sky.

Chapter 30: A Ray of Light

Wh-What should I do? How do I get myself out of this mess?!

On the inside, Mia was descending into panic. Becoming Sion's dance partner would mean associating with him — intimately so. If their acquaintance deepened, and then something went wrong, the three step process of *Revolution→Sunkland Gets Involved→Guillotine* would become a very real possibility. That was bad. In fact, that was about as bad as it could get. However, turning Sion down here would surely sour his opinion of her. Furthermore, if she were to lie and say that she already had a dance partner, it'd be close to impossible for her to actually find one. No one was desperate enough to try their luck with the princess who'd turned down an offer from *Sion.* With her back against the wall and the ceiling about to collapse, Mia frantically searched for a way out. Like a tiny mouse stuck on a sinking ship, she kicked all her senses into overdrive, trying to find something — anything — that would give her a chance to survive. Just then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of her handkerchief-resistant friend, Abel, being dragged behind a building corner by an older male student. Judging by the brief glimpse she got of their expressions, the ensuing interaction wasn't going to be pleasant. Her spidey — or rather, mousey — sense tingled.

This is my chance!

The troubling sight gave her the perfect excuse to flee the scene.

"Hm? What's going on there?" asked Sion, turning in the same direction. He seemed to have noticed as well. Before he could get another word out, though, he heard a series of rapid footsteps.

"Excuse me for a moment."

He turned just in time to see Mia's profile as she streamed straight past him.

"What... do you think you're doing?"

"Like I said, my dear brother, I was looking for a dance partner

__”

Abel’s sentence was cut short by a fist slamming into his face.

My, how terribly barbaric. Being Abel’s brother, I suppose that would make him... the First Prince? Thought Mia as she watched from the shadows.

“Wimpy piece of... Always bending over backwards to suck up to women... If you’ve got a shred of pride left as a Remno, then get better with the sword. Then they’ll line up to kiss *your* ass instead,” said the brother with a disdainful huff. “Hmph. Then again, I guess it’ll never happen for a little chickenshit like you. Go lick their boots all you want, but no decent woman is going to choose you as a dance partner.”

Well, that’s a rather twisted view of things... I would consider it basic manners to approach girls who look like they’re in need of help.

After mentally giving the older brother’s behavior a firm stamp of disapproval, Mia spoke up.

“What seems to be the matter here?”

Both brothers spun toward her in surprise.

“Who’re you supposed to be...” growled the older of the two. “We’re in the middle of something right now, young lady. Oh, but don’t worry your pretty little head. Nothing more than your usual brotherly quarrel. Absolutely nothing to see here, so if you could just mosey along we’d all be better off, you get me?”

He leaned in toward Mia, pushing his face almost right up against hers and staring her down. While it was good practice to look directly at children when speaking to them, there was nothing benign about the way he was glaring at her. It wasn’t an attempt at communication. It was an overt threat.

In response, Mia felt overcome by a sense of... something that resembled fondness.

My, what a naughty young boy!

It bears repeating that on the inside, Mia was actually a young woman of twenty. Though she’d spent over three years in a dungeon, which somewhat crippled her mental maturity in certain aspects, she was still technically an adult. On top of that, she’d experienced the horrors of the revolution. She’d been threatened and condemned. She’d even had swords pointed at her neck as she faced the murderous rage of violent rebels. That is to say, she’d *seen some shit.*

In comparison, the antics of Abel’s brother were literal child’s

play. Try as he might to look big and mean, he was ultimately a pampered prince who'd been brought up in a sheltered environment. Also, while he was First Prince, he came from the Remno Kingdom, which was inferior in status to the Empire.

Why, it would appear that I have absolutely nothing to fear!

Mia scoffed in amusement.

"Wh-What's so funny?!"

"My, how rude of me. I do apologize. However, could you keep your hands away from him, please? I would very much prefer to keep my dance partner's face in good condition."

Then, without a hint of hesitation, she walked right up to Abel. Finding that he'd cut his lip, she took out her pristine white handkerchief, gently pressed it to his mouth, and smiled.

"Well, I do hope you realize, Prince Abel, that this all happened because you keep flirting with other girls when you've already asked me to be your dance partner."

"Wha—?"

Abel's jaw hit the ground. Mia allowed it to remain there, choosing instead to curtsy shallowly at the older boy.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, First Prince of the Remno Kingdom," she said with a dazzling smile. "I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire and the woman who had the indecency to choose your brother."

Chapter 31: Princess Mia… Appears in All Her Glory

Abel Remno knew he was a loser.

Likewise, he knew Remno was a second-rate kingdom. It possessed neither the rich history and tradition of Sunkland nor the sheer might of Tearmoon. Outmatched by even Belluga in influence and authority, it failed to garner any real respect from its neighbors. The only way it managed to hold its own among its first-rate neighbors was by strengthening its military. As a result, swordsmanship was exceptionally valued in the kingdom, and its young men spent much of their time honing their skill with the sword and competing with one another.

As royalty, Abel had been subjected to an intense regimen of training since childhood. Day after day, he practiced. Day after day, he was told to practice more. So long as the King's blood ran in his veins, his goal should be to become the best swordsman in the kingdom. However, never — not even once — had he bested his older brother, the First Prince. Nevertheless, he kept trying. He put in the work, enduring endless grueling training sessions in the hopes of one day beating his brother at swordplay.

But one day he'd been forced to face the cold, hard truth: in this world, there existed some talent so sublime — so utterly unequaled — that no amount of hard work could ever hope to reach its heights. It was the day he traveled to the Sunkland Empire and witnessed the swordsmanship of Sion Sol Sunkland. It was a terrifying sight. His skill with the sword was so overwhelming that not even the experienced knights could equal him. The deftness of his blade defied logic; he bested one opponent after another — all full-grown adults and all with far superior weight and reach.

As he watched, Abel felt something waver inside him. The level of mastery on display was incomparable to even the brother he could never beat. He was witnessing a true genius at work — a true genius who was the same age as him. And, when he discovered that

this boy was First Prince of a first-rate kingdom, that something inside him snapped.

There were those, he realized, who were favored by God. They were chosen to be superior... and he wasn't one of them. No matter how hard he tried, he'd never stand shoulder to shoulder.

The most I'll ever be is second-rate...

Once that thought took root in his mind, everything — the hard work, the practice, all of it — suddenly lost all meaning. What was even the point? Why suffer the hardship? Why endure the pain? There was no need. Fortunately, he was blessed with his mother's looks, and here in Remno, whose society skewed toward male chauvinism, he only had to display a little bit of kindness to receive the adorations of women. His maids, for example, loved him to bits. And so he would go on to become known as a second-rate prince, indulging in many dozens of mistresses over his lifetime and ultimately leaving his mark upon history as no more than an unprecedented playboy.

Or so he should have, had she not appeared before him in all her glory. Her name was Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the mighty Tearmoon Empire. Known to some as a saint of profound wisdom, the young girl stepped in front of Abel and, with nothing more than a few dozen words, smashed his future of decadent flippancy to pieces. In a bright voice that carried to every student in the courtyard, she declared him to be her dance partner.

"And that is why," she continued, "Prince Sion, it is with the utmost regret that I must inform you, I cannot accept your generous invitation to the dance."

Abel could hardly believe his ears. The man chosen by God to be first-rate royalty in every sense, Sion Sol Sunkland, had asked her to the dance. And she'd turned him down, just like that.

S-Son of a swordseller! This is insane!

Abel panicked. This couldn't — shouldn't — be happening. No matter how generous an opinion one held of him, he was *not* a suitable match for Princess Mia. This was obvious to everyone, *especially* him. So, after the commotion settled, he hurried over to Mia.

"Princess Mia! I know you saved me back there, and I'm deeply grateful for that, but that was enough. Please, take Prince Sion as your partner to the dance."

"My, what's this? Do you wish to embarrass me in front of my

peers by rejecting me?"

"No, not at all! But what's the point of dancing with me? With all due respect, Your Highness, we're a terrible match. I'm not good enough for you."

"Improve, then. Better yourself so that you are."

"Huh? B-But..."

Words failed him. For a few seconds, he simply stood there with his mouth open. Then...

"I... I can't. I'm sorry, Princess Mia. I don't have the talent," he finally said. His expression grew pained. "It doesn't matter how hard I try. I'll never be as good as Prince Sion. I doubt I'd stand a chance against even my own brother..." Long-repressed emotions — frustration, disappointment, grief — spilled into his voice. They were the true feelings that he kept hidden from everyone.

Everyone except himself.

How could he? Who but him would know his own anguish? The dark despair of trying, and trying, and trying, only to fail?

Yet faced with his dejection, Mia chose to smile.

"Prince Abel, all you know is *now*. You don't stand a chance against them *now*. Am I wrong?"

"...Huh?"

"Perhaps you feel unworthy of me today, and perhaps that is true. Then what about tomorrow? And if not tomorrow, the day after? The road of betterment is paved day by day, and who knows for certain where it leads? On the day when you draw your final breath, who is to say that you shall not stand above Prince Sion? No one knows what the future holds, Prince Abel. Not you, not him, and... certainly not me." Mia paused for a beat. Slowly, she closed her eyes. "If you cannot trust my words, then allow me to offer you some assurance. *I* chose you as my dance partner. There is not the slightest possibility that you cannot triumph over Prince Sion, much less your brother. I, Mia Luna Tearmoon, guarantee it."

Her words, almost prophetic in their certainty, pierced Abel's heart.

Well, that should do it for the pep talk. Prince Abel had better start stepping it up. After all, it'd be a problem if I needed Remno's help one day and that stupid brother of his got in the way. With that said... I can't believe how good it felt to reject Prince Sion in public! That was simply sublime! *Oh ho ho!*

As usual, Her Highness was as petty as ever on the inside. Her actions, however, had thrown a massive wrench into the cogs of fate. From this day forth, the life of Abel Remno began to proceed down a very different path.

Chapter 32: Saint, Schemer, or Seductress?

"My oh my, she sure turned you down good, milord," said Keithwood as he approached Sion, who now stood alone following the departure of Mia and Abel. "Have to say, though, sure didn't see that one coming. Rejecting *you*, huh. She's got some grit, that one. A shame that you missed out on this opportunity to acquaint yourself with the princess. Still, this is hardly the only chance you'll have. No reason for upset... Oh? Well, what's this?"

Keithwood cocked an eyebrow, for he just saw an extremely uncommon sight. Sion — his lord and master, who had been trained since childhood to maintain the composure and disposition of royalty — had displeasure written all over his face. In fact, it wasn't just displeasure. It almost seemed like... sulking.

"Now don't tell me you're in a bad mood just because a girl's not going to a dance with you."

"Of course not," Sion responded, forcing the corners of his lips up. He might have meant it as a smile, but it definitely did not involve enough muscles. "The actions she took were exemplary, resulting in both resolution of the conflict and minimal damage to Prince Abel's reputation. Remno's First Prince does seem to have a rather disagreeable personality, so it's fully understandable that she'd want to defend Prince Abel."

Good points, good points. Now if only it didn't sound like you were primarily trying to convince yourself.

Keithwood was older than Sion by four years. Their relationship was not a simple one, and due to its many facets, he harbored a variety of different emotions and attitudes toward his prince. While he loved and respected Sion as a principled lord, he also felt an obligation to mentor the dear son of the King he owed so much. Furthermore, having grown up together, they would always share the innocent camaraderie of childhood friends. There were also times — like now — when he couldn't help but feel like an older

brother who happened upon the perfect chance to poke some fun at his younger sibling.

"Besides, I was the one who asked. I'm well aware that the other party has the right to both accept *and* deny my invitation."

"But for some reason, you can't help but sulk about it?"

"I'm *not* sulking!" snarled Sion in a childish rebuttal that caught Keithwood off guard. "I'm just... a tad disappointed. But I'm not upset about it."

Keithwood, both eyebrows now fully raised, regarded the pout on his prince's face.

Huh. It's not every day you see Sion get so worked up, he mused. Normally, Sion would calmly brush off his teasing. *I wonder if we're past the stage of dispassionate interest... Perhaps Sion has some genuine feelings for this girl...*

The truth was that Keithwood had correctly identified the source of Sion's petulance before even Sion himself. The prince's current feelings very closely resembled those of a boy who'd gotten the cold shoulder from the girl he liked.

Princess Mia, huh.

Admittedly, Mia's reply came as a surprise for him as well. Though he wouldn't say it out loud, in Keithwood's personal opinion, Sion had Abel beat flat. There wasn't a single aspect in which Abel held the upper hand. Granted, now that he'd gotten a look at him, he could see that the second Remno Prince was indeed an attractive lad. He wasn't just handsome, he also carried himself with an air of grace. Once school started, he was probably the type who'd become rather popular.

...But that was it. In Keithwood's eyes, Abel truly conformed to the old adage — beauty is only skin deep. His charm was extremely superficial. Those who found the likes of him appealing were hardly worthy of consideration.

Under normal circumstances, anyway. The problem is that in this case, he's up against Sion.

Put side by side, Abel's everyday good looks paled in comparison. The superior of the two in terms of both inner and outer appeal, Sion was overwhelmingly the more attractive option. Indeed, whether one delighted in the frivolity of the face or sought the substance of the mind, the Crown Prince of Sunkland had it all. He charmed schoolgirl and sage alike.

And yet Mia chose Abel to be her dance partner, turning down

an offer from Sion in order to do so. She passed up a chance to tread the ballroom floor with Sion and ignored Abel's fervent plea that she reconsider.

To protect Prince Abel's reputation...? I suppose that makes sense, but...

Keithwood had a creeping suspicion there was more to it than that. There had to be some other reason. Something about what she'd said to him... It almost sounded like she was trying to motivate him.

Does she see something else in Prince Abel? Some hidden talent that eludes me?

She was, after all, the much-lauded Great Sage of the Empire. It would be prudent to assume some deeper motive.

So, princess, what are you? A benevolent saint concerned with the social well-being of others, or a careful schemer whose every move is meticulously calculated?

Just then, a thought occurred to him that made him smile wryly.

Or maybe... she was just teasing him? That smile of hers was less saint and more... young seductress, if you ask me. Who'd have thought? Clever as Sion is, there might be a girl who's playing him like a fiddle.

It would be some time before Keithwood would learn of — what he would *think* were — Mia's "true" intentions. The experience would shake him to the core, for he would witness first-hand — again, what he *thought* was — the reason Mia was known as the Great Sage of the Empire.

That, however, comes later. For now, only one thing was for certain: unbeknownst to her, Mia had gained another title — the young seductress.

Chapter 33: Natural Beauty

An hour before the dance began, Mia was alone in the communal baths. Was this the self-assurance of royalty? The confidence of the elite? The laxness of attitude afforded only to those who believed that showing up late was fashionable? No, it was not. As a matter of fact, Mia was close to tears.

“Hnnngh, this is the worst... This is the absolute worst!”

Extravagant dresses that required wrapping themselves in layer upon layer of fabric were all the rage among the young ladies of the nobility. Combined with the extensive application of makeup, it was easy to see how preparing for a ball could take several hours.

So why, then, was Mia sitting in a bath, all by herself, with not even Anne in sight? The answer lay in her hair, which was covered in some sort of sticky, mucus-like substance. Currently, she was frantically lathering her hair in an attempt to clean it...

To explain this situation would require replaying the events that led up to this moment.

Mia got up early that day and after lunch began changing into her dress, with plenty of time left until the party. Her excessively doting father, the Emperor, had sent her a dress of the finest quality that couldn’t be found in any other kingdom. Though it was especially time-consuming to put on, it was also incomparably gorgeous. By the time she’d finished putting on the elaborate dress and had applied the perfect makeup look to compliment it, there were still two hours left until the party. That two-hour leeway and the comfort it afforded would prove to be her downfall.

“Since there’s still some time, perhaps I should take a look around the academy...”

As she strolled around the school grounds, she happened upon a new sight. The equestrian club was walking its horses.

This is the first time I’ve seen them up close like this.

As she idly regarded the horses, one of them brought its nose down to her. Mia wasn’t averse to animals. Figuring the creature

just wanted to nuzzle, she reached out her hand, intending to give it a pat.

Ker-choo!

The horse sneezed on her.

“Hyaaaaaah!”

It was a mighty sneeze, accompanied by a heavy payload. After the burst of air passed, Mia found herself covered in horse snot.

“Ughhh... Why... Why did this happen...” said a sniffling Mia on the verge of tears.

It was truly an unfortunate event. Of course, it was also true that in her excitement, she'd sprayed a ton of her favorite perfume all over herself, and the scent might have been a tad strong. However, as the undeniable victim in this situation, she definitely deserved some sympathy.

Anne almost fainted when she saw her crestfallen master plodding her way back. She quickly ran over to console Mia, but she knew full well the dress was ruined. Though she'd instructed Mia to go clean herself off in the bath, there was little else she could do. Or so she thought...

"...Well, there's nothing for it. I suppose I'll just have to make do. Anne, could you help me put on some basic makeup so I don't make a fool of myself? And as for the dress, just go pick any old one..."

The disheartened voice of her master lit a fire in Anne's soul. She was a maid, damn it, and as a maid, she wasn't going to let this stand!

This won't do! I won't allow the princess to embarrass herself!

The fire grew and grew. It raged and roared, infusing her with a burning passion that awakened her *true maid spirit*!

Princess Mia is a natural beauty, so she doesn't even need much makeup to look stunning!

With that thought in mind, she only applied some eyeliner. Mia's eyes normally looked a little fierce, so she softened their corners a little. The rest of the time she devoted to Mia's outfit. It was far too late to put her in a formal dress, so she'd have to go with a semi-formal one, in which case it was best to avoid anything too gaudy. In the end, she settled on a completely white dress. It showed a bit of shoulder, and the skirt was on the shorter side, making it perfect for dancing. As a final touch before time ran out, she applied a few spritzes of perfume — one with a far fainter scent than the one Mia had used on herself earlier.

When Mia arrived at the party, she caught the eye of every single boy there. Among a sea of girls, all in extremely elaborate dresses, Mia alone radiated an aura of health. The reason was simple: almost all the other girls were wearing tightly-laced corsets, which had the effect of adding a sheen of color to their skin best described as "asphyxiating white." Their blanched faces more pallid

than pretty, some of them looked like they might keel over at any second. In comparison, Mia wore a simple dress without a corset. She'd also just taken a nice, warm bath that got her blood flowing, so her cheeks were rosy and her skin glowed. Furthermore, as a result of trading in an elaborate, eye-catching dress for a simpler one, the focus of her entire outfit had shifted. The appeal was no longer the dress but its contents. What was supposed to be an outfit lacking in extravagance instead became the perfect garment to show off the fruits of Anne's meticulous efforts — Mia's impeccable skin.

All these factors came together to push the public consensus of Mia from "passably pretty" up to "fairly pretty." It didn't become "exquisitely pretty" or anything. She didn't suddenly become the stuff of legend. However, her beauty was definitely enough to turn the heads of all the boys at the party. And when the fairly pretty Mia decided to let out a forlorn sigh, a couple of them turned to look at her so quickly they probably gave themselves whiplash.

As I thought... Being so lightly dressed, I stand out like a sore thumb.

None of the boys at the party could have imagined that Mia arrived in a simple dress because she'd suffered a bout of terrible misfortune at the nose of a horse. All they knew was that the princess had immediately stolen many of their hearts.

Chapter 34: Mia's Forte

At this point, it is necessary to point out that among the boys of the academy, there existed a rather prevalent belief about beauty...

In their innocence and naiveté — and perhaps stupidity — they held such opinions as "the best makeup is no makeup" and "the most precious beauty is natural beauty." Granted, in purely theoretical terms, this was perhaps a valid view. To possess such raw charm and splendor would indeed be ideal. After all, who wouldn't want to wake up every day looking like a superstar? No powder, no jewels, just pure unbridled glamor exuding from every pore of the body.

Now, as for the other side of this equation, that is, the girls who had to live up to this ridiculous expectation... They held significantly more realistic outlooks. To spend hours doing your hair, putting on makeup, and then walking around half-suffocating in a corset only to have some blockhead tell you he'd rather you looked pretty without them... was enough to make even the most dignified of girls hurl an expletive or two. Unfortunately for them, however, their male classmates held on to this belief with an almost religious fervor. Such thinking was especially prevalent among the nobility. Unlike their common counterparts who spent more on bread than beauty, noble boys were constantly surrounded by girls who were finely dressed and elaborately powdered.

Abel Remno also happened to be one of those who succumbed to this attitude.

Did that... really happen?

While he waited for Mia, he felt a growing sense of doubt. The events of that day felt so surreal that he wasn't sure it hadn't all been a dream. His dance partner was the Princess of the mighty Tearmoon Empire. Even now, he still had trouble believing it. And when Mia finally appeared at the other side of the room, white dress and radiant skin giving off a palpable aura of beauty, he almost pinched himself.

My god... she's gorgeous...

Abel stared, transfixed at the sight of her illuminated faintly by the dim light of the ballroom. In his eyes, she looked every bit as lovely as the moon goddess herself. It was a classic example of the oil painting effect — beautiful, when viewed from afar.

Mia turned head after head as she approached, and when she stopped in front of him, they were the focus of everyone's attention. He realized his lips were very dry. Doubt began to creep into his mind.

I'm going to dance... with her? *This has to be a dream, right? Or some crazy misunderstanding.*

Everything about the situation seemed so far-fetched that he couldn't help but wonder if his mind had been playing tricks on him the whole time. And because he was so concerned with his own supposed inadequacy, when the first words out of Mia's mouth were, "I'm terribly sorry, Prince Abel," he thought for sure she was calling the whole thing off.

Yeah, I figured. Well, I guess that's that. Prince Sion is a better match for her anyway.

The realization came with a heavy dose of disappointment but also the slightest sense of relief, which caused him to reply in a somewhat blithe tone, "Oh, don't be. I don't mind. You *are* very beautiful, after all."

Though he left unsaid the implication of his last sentence, he figured his meaning was clear: it wasn't worth her time to bother with someone like him, and she should feel free to go approach Prince Sion.

In response, Mia placed her hands on her petite bosom and let out a sigh of relief.

"How terribly kind of you, Prince Abel. Thank you very much." Then, for some reason, she took Abel's right hand in hers. "Well, then. Shall we?"

"...What?"

Before he knew it, she'd guided him to the middle of the ballroom.

Mia had kicked herself into high gear.

She didn't look nearly as good as she'd hoped, and yet Abel was still kind enough to show her a gentle smile and tell her she was beautiful. Though she knew it was flattery, she still appreciated the impulse.

Prince Abel is such a gentleman. He didn't say a word about the dress.

However, she couldn't just rely on his good will for the rest of the night. She needed to earn some points fair and square...

As princess of the Empire, Mia had been the recipient of an elite education since childhood, but her grades had never been impressive. Now, after her reincarnation, she was actually putting some work into her studies. Even so, she only managed to be slightly above average. Mediocrity was truly the name of her game.

That said, there was one thing at which she excelled — ballroom dancing. She was a top-notch dancer who could twirl with the best of them. Furthermore, she didn't just make herself look good. Her dancing was *receptive*. She was good enough to read her partner and match his skill level, allowing him to experience the thrill of their steps flowing in perfect unison. Make no mistake, as a dancer, Mia was the real deal.

And yet, in the previous timeline, never once did she have a chance to show off her outstanding talent. After turning down everyone who'd asked her to dance at the welcoming party for new students and spending the whole night by herself, she'd given everyone the impression that she hated dancing. Consequently, no one ever asked her to any more dances, and she endured many an evening thereafter in the company of no one but her own lonesome self.

This is it! The time has come for me to show off my dance expertise!

With Abel's hand in hers, she gently pressed his palm and smiled.

"Let us dance, Prince Abel."

"Wait, wha—"

Though he stammered hesitantly, as soon as she began, he immediately fell into step.

Hm. Not bad at all. He seems to know what he's doing.

Mia nodded with satisfaction as she stole a quick glance at Abel. His face was a mask of intense concentration. There was a stiffness to his steps, but it didn't feel like the unfamiliarity of an amateur. Rather, it seemed to be due to him paying far too much attention to the floor in an effort to keep from stepping on Mia's feet.

Not stepping on a lady's feet is indeed the most basic of courtesies, after all. I suppose that's preferable to trying so hard to dance well that

he loses track of his partner. Of course, with me as his partner, that's an entirely unnecessary concern...

Little did he know, he couldn't step on Mia's feet if he'd tried. She was far too skilled of a dancer to allow that to happen.

My, do I sense some potential here? How exciting! thought Mia as she upped the ante and broke into a sequence of steps just outside of Abel's comfort zone. He could still keep up, but he'd have to work to do so. The difficulty was just right; it was the kind of sequence that, by the end, would push him to become a better dancer.

Chapter 35: Shall We Dance?

The evening that Mia Luna Tearmoon first appeared in the ballroom before her classmates would go on to become the stuff of legend, and it all began with rumblings of discontent slowly spreading through the room.

After becoming the absolute center of attention, the actual dance she'd performed was totally average.

"...What, is that it? I guess she knows how to stand out, but her dancing isn't anything to write home about."

"Well, what did you expect? I mean, Imperial Highness or not, she's just a kid."

Whispers, jealous and mocking, could be heard throughout the ballroom. While Mia's fellow first-years might still be star-struck, the older students saw her as an eyesore. Many had gone through considerable pains to make themselves look pretty, only to have the thunder stolen from them by Mia's arrival. Having been relegated to little more than scenery, they decided to let their displeasure be known. None of them would say it to her face, of course, but few could resist talking behind her back. As for the target of their animosity, though...

"There you go, Prince Abel. My, your steps are quite good."

Mia couldn't have cared less about the murmurs in the audience. She simply continued to dance, politely and carefully leading Abel through step after step with the accuracy of a seasoned instructor. Except her lead was invisible. From the perspective of the onlookers, it looked every bit like she was following Abel's steps. By dancing in service of her partner, Mia allowed him to revel in the moment.

The best dancers elevated their partners. Mia did just that.

No one in the ballroom had caught on to what Mia was doing.

Is it just me, or...

No one except Abel himself.

Is Princess Mia holding back so I can keep up?

At the same time, he also noticed the reactions of the crowd. He saw their scornful gazes and heard their derisive laughs, all of which were directed at Mia. After seeing her arrive like the star of the party, they watched with malicious delight as she proceeded to make a fool of herself on the floor. Worst of all, he knew he was the cause, and the knowledge filled him with regret and guilt.

She's the one who said she believed in me. And now she's the one being humiliated. This... This can't...

He looked at her. She looked back, her face a mask of nonchalance. It was a front. It had to be. A kindness to put his mind at ease. She was doing this... for *him.* He grimaced. It was a thought too painful to bear. Just then, he saw a figure out of the corner of his eye. It was the only person in this room who was a match for Mia.

As soon as the music ended, he took Mia's hand and led her toward a group of students where Sion Sol Sunkland, surrounded by a circle of girls, was enjoying some light banter.

"Prince Abel? Where are we going?"

Without answering, he waded through the girls and approached Sion.

"Prince Sion, I need to ask you a favor."

"What's the matter?" asked Sion, somewhat surprised by the sudden request.

"I'm feeling a little tired. I'd like to rest for a while. In the meantime, could I ask you to be the princess's partner?"

"Prince Abel?!" exclaimed Mia, aghast at the proposition.

He paid her no mind and kept his eyes on Sion. A brief silence ensued.

"Fair enough. It's true that I very much wished to take to the floor with Princess Mia. Since the opportunity has presented itself..." He turned to Mia. "Might I ask you to join me for a number?"

"What?!"

Mia glanced at Abel, who simply said, "I'm a little spent, so I'll go get some drinks."

For a few moments, she said nothing. Then, she turned toward Sion and, with an innocent smile, answered, "...Of course. Just one piece, then."

Abel felt his chest tighten at the sight. That loveliest of smiles, which until moments ago had been his alone, was now directed at

someone else. Regret mixed with sorrow and envy, swirling together into a dark torrent of emotions that threatened to burst out of him in a scream of frustration.

Because... I have no power...

A feeling, burning and strong, rose in his chest. It was a feeling he'd never before felt toward Sion. He didn't want to lose. Faced with an opponent that he'd once thought unbeatable — someone who, despite his best efforts, would forever outmatch him — he didn't want to admit defeat. He didn't want to give up. For the first time in his life, he felt passion — hot, burning passion that seared his body and consumed his soul.

"Next time..." he said, feeling the pain of his teeth sinking into his lips. "Next time... I won't let her go."

Then, he turned and walked away.

Now, it might be appropriate to describe the thoughts that were going through Mia's head while she smiled at Sion.

Indeed, the opportunity has presented itself... to trip you up, that is! I hope you take a spectacular fall and make a terrible fool of yourself with everyone watching!

To be clear, dancing with Sion was the last thing she wanted to do, but if she had no choice, she figured she might as well make the best of this situation and try to embarrass him in any way possible. With such petty malice filling her mind, her expression couldn't help but follow suit. In other words, Abel was already so blinded by his own misconceptions that he managed to see the evil grin on Mia's face as a besotted smile. Such was the extent of his blindness.

However, Mia's scheme would prove unsuccessful. She'd forgotten a crucial fact. Prince Sion Sol Sunkland was flawless in every way. Unlike Mia, who was flawless only when she danced, he was good at whatever he set his mind to. As for his skill on the ballroom floor...

And so, the legendary evening approached its climax.

Chapter 36: Cool Kindness

Though she'd decided to trip Sion up, Mia had no intention of doing so physically. That would be much too obvious. While she certainly had the skills to pull it off — a quick kick to the shins could be easily disguised as a careless misstep — she wasn't wearing the right attire. Unlike a longer dress that hid the ankles, the one she currently wore had a much shorter skirt, making it far more difficult to hide a kick. In fact, she'd never planned to behave aggressively toward Sion to begin with. Outright hostility would obviously rouse his ire, and an angry Sion seemed like the exact kind of thing that would launch her straight onto the guillotine route.

Besides, I won't even need to. It's not as if he can keep up with me when I'm dancing at my highest skill level. If I don't hold back, he'll end up tripping all over his own two feet trying to keep up! she thought, figuring Sion couldn't hold a candle to her. *Oh, I can see it now. Your futile attempt to keep up with me. Your spectacular fall. And the embarrassment of face-planting in front of everyone. Simply sublime!*

It was the perfect plan.

She thought.

But, during the dance...

"Well, color me surprised. I was expecting to waltz with a fledgling, but I find myself tangoing with a swan," Sion said with a brisk smile as he glided across the floor with her, his steps smooth and confident.

H-H-How is this happening?!

One half of her brain was dedicated to maintaining the complicated footwork of their dance while the other half tried desperately to hold back a scream. Round and round she went, weaving and twirling like a fairy in a meadow. Every time she passed the window, moonlight bounced off her pearlescent skin, and she glowed with a celestial aura. The steps of her peers slowed to a halt. Before long, she and Sion were the only ones dancing.

In the beginning, the mocking continued. They credited Sion.

They said it was because he was a good lead. Within seconds, the murmurs faded. Amongst the nobility, it was common knowledge that it took two to dance. A single brilliant dancer was a synonym for futility. Only when both dancers were exceptionally skilled could they put on the kind of mesmerizing performance being witnessed now.

Mia's body spun, graceful and weightless. She fell freely to one side, where Sion's arm was already lying in wait and felt a push on her back, gentle but firm. It placed her back onto her feet with just enough momentum to launch her into the next sequence of steps. His dancing was graceful and smooth. He led with a soft touch and an elegant posture. The way he caught her in his arms felt so much like a tender embrace that Mia couldn't help but feel a flutter in her heart.

Moons have mercy... How terribly dreamy— I mean, no! Not dreamy! This is the last person I should be dreaming about!

As Mia struggled to keep her inner fangirl in check, her wandering eyes found a familiar figure in a corner of the room.

My, isn't that Prince Abel?

She saw him walking toward the bar with two glasses in his hands. Noticing that the glasses were empty, she felt a wave of warmth in her heart.

What a kind soul he is.

Eventually, the music came to a stop, and the number ended. Mia gave her skirt a quick tug and performed an elegant curtsy.

"Well, now," Sion said to her. "If possible, I'd like to join you for another number. A quieter one this time. What do you say?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Prince Sion, but I must decline. Surely you're aware that there is someone else who would be a more suitable partner for you."

She meant it as a thinly veiled insult, *Nice try, smart guy, but you aren't good enough for me,* but it was really just her being a sore loser. Then, she gave a quick curtsey and walked away, leaving Sion blinking in stunned silence.

"Prince Abel!"

Looking up, Abel was surprised to find Mia approaching him. She and Sion had made such a perfect pair that he thought for sure they'd dance at least two or three more numbers together. Regardless, now that she was here, he picked up one of his two

glasses — now filled — and handed it to her with a smile.

"Ah, Princess Mia. You were brilliant out on the floor."

"My, how flattering of you."

The sight of Mia giggling bashfully proved too much for him to handle, and he had to avert his eyes.

"Still, I have to say... I'm just no match, huh."

"No match?"

"For Prince Sion. It pains me to admit, but unfortunately, there's no way *I* could have drawn out that much of your true potential."

He'd felt the flood of passion. He'd sworn not to give up. But reality was a cruel mistress, and faced with the overwhelming difference in skill, his resolve began to falter. In response, Mia brought the glass of juice to her lips.

"I appreciate this drink very much. It's cool and quite refreshing," she said, making no mention of Sion. "You're a kind and wonderful person, Prince Abel."

"Hah, that's damning me with faint praise. Did you think I was the kind of man who'd show up with only a glass for himself?"

"You should take it to mean that I see that you were mindful of the physically taxing nature of dancing and went to refresh my drink. Thank you."

Abel's jaw dropped at this remark. He hadn't expected her to hit the nail right on the head. What she said was true; he'd gone to get warm drinks as soon as the music had started. However, after seeing the way Mia danced, he figured she'd feel hot afterwards and went to exchange the drinks for cold ones.

"Prince Abel, please do not disparage yourself. You *are* a wonderful person."

Mia's words were spoken with genuine kindness, unmarred by her usual pettiness and falsity. She truly meant what she'd said. It was the first time a boy her age had treated her so nicely. As a princess, she'd received plenty of courtesy from her subjects, but as a girl, she'd never felt so personally cared for. A little dazed from the experience, she'd ended up saying something that was arguably a little forward of her.

"Still... If at all possible, I'd rather not lose to Prince Sion on the floor, either."

"In that case, allow me to train you. I'd urge you to prepare yourself, though. I do not spoil my students."

Thus, on this evening, Mia managed for the first time in her life to dance to her heart's content, enjoying every gasp of the crowd and flutter of her heart.

Chapter 37: A Maid Behind the Scenes

Now, let us rewind the clock a little.

"Anne, hold out your hand," said Mia.

She'd just finished changing her dress. As she prepared to leave for the party, she turned to Anne and pressed a coin of Bellugian gold into her palm.

"Use it however you want," she said.

In general, Mia was pretty thrifty, prefering to save whenever possible. After all, extravagance could quickly spell her headless doom. On top of that, once it occurred to her that anything she bought might very well end up in the hands of the revolutionary army anyway, she felt a significantly decreased desire to purchase things. Her one exception was the money she gave her right hand and confidante, Anne. Her actions in the previous timeline stood for themselves, but even now, she'd left her family to follow Mia here. It was Mia's intention to repay her loyal maid in every way she could.

"Consider yourself on leave while I'm at the party. You can head out to town, or stay in the dorm. Feel free to do whatever you wish."

It had only been three days since they'd arrived here in Saint-Noel, but it was certainly possible that Anne was starting to feel tired from adjusting to the new environment. There was almost a frantic energy to the way she just went about dressing Mia up. Though it would be only a short break, it was still a chance for her to relax and refresh herself. So, she said to Anne what she thought would allow her devoted maid to unwind.

"Understood, Princess Mia. Your wish is my command. I shall make sure it gets done."

Instead, she received an enthusiastic promise of commitment, leaving her scratching her head.

Ever since becoming Mia's personal maid-in-waiting, Anne's life had taken a drastic turn. Though she'd been sending almost all of

her pay back home, she was now free of monetary concerns. Furthermore, with her sister Elise being employed as the princess's court author, their whole family was now able to afford a much more comfortable lifestyle. For these reasons, it never occurred to her that the money Mia handed her was meant to be spent for personal leisure.

She'd left it to me to decide on its use. I need to make sure it's spent well!

From her perspective, she'd been entrusted with coin and time, as well as a mission to accomplish something with them.

What can I do to help Princess Mia?

She pondered the question, trying to figure out what was expected of her. The conclusion she reached in the end was, through the strangest coincidence, the exact same thing Mia was trying to do — make connections.

Of course, Anne had no way of acquainting herself with the students of the nobility. However, she could certainly get to know the people who worked at the academy. From cooks and gardeners to dormitory supervisors, the staff were all commoners with whom she could easily establish rapport. The days she'd spent working at the castle had taught her an important fact: a castle didn't work on its own. It required an army of staff to support its day-to-day operations. Their power, when put together, was not to be underestimated.

Whether it's to help Princess Mia find love, or to make sure she has a comfortable time at school, we'll need all kinds of connections...

She tightened her grip on the Bellugian gold and headed into town. For those working near the flames of the kitchen, she brought premium horse oil for their parched hands. For those laboring in the gardens, she brought nutritious foods to maintain their stamina. From place to place, she observed people's work and delivered the kinds of things they'd most appreciate. Unlike nobles, who generally had a surplus of personal possessions, commoners rejoiced at even the smallest of gifts. With so many people so easily pleased, it was an opportunity ripe for the taking, and she seized upon it. By the time she was done, she was down to half of the gold she'd started with.

"I think that'll do it for now..."

As she strolled through town, she found herself stopping in front of a clothing store.

“Wow... It’s so pretty.”

Her eyes were drawn to a dress on display. With light blue as its base tone, it had a lovely sense of innocence further adorned with a pattern that evoked a field of spring flowers.

“Hmm, it’s a wonderful dress, but I think it’s a little too big for Princess Mia.”

She glanced at the price and found it was exactly the amount she had left. After a brief period of contemplation, she ultimately chose to leave it be.

Upon returning to the academy, Anne let out a short sigh.

“Okay, I’ve got about two hours until the party ends.”

She considered heading back to her room for a short break, but when she passed by the courtyard, the sight of a girl there gave her pause.

“Huh?”

The girl kept looking this way and that, as though she was frantically searching for something. Her breaths were uneven, and she seemed to be on the verge of tears. Her silver hair reached down to her waist, and her light-brown skin glowed with health. These were characteristics of an ethnic minority of the Empire, the Lulu Tribe.

Also, she recognized the girl.

“Weren’t you... with Miss Tiona?”

She was the maid-in-waiting to Tiona, daughter of the Rudolvons. On the day of Mia’s arrival at Saint-Noel, she and Mia had run into the pair being bullied by a group of noble girls.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

The girl turned toward her with a face full of concern and nodded her head.

“Please... Miss Tiona... Is in trouble... Help her... Please...” she said in broken Continenta.

Liora Lulu was born in the forested region of the Empire where the Lulu Tribe lived. She was still learning the common tongue, Continenta. Normally, that alone would disqualify her from being brought to a place such as Saint-Noel, no matter how good a maid she might be. Nevertheless, she was selected. The reason, unfortunately, was nothing inspiring. It was due to sheer lack of competition. The Rudolvons were far from rich, and just sending

their daughter to Saint-Noel was already stretching their meager finances. Under a policy introduced by Rafina, the daughter of the Bellugian Duke, the academy opened its doors not only to the highest echelons of nobility but also to the poorer and smaller noble families. Enrollment itself was, therefore, a possibility, but they could expect no monetary support. As a result, the Rudolvons simply couldn't afford to pay the expensive wages required for a veteran maid to accompany Tiona.

There was, however, one more reason she had been chosen.

"Liora, please be careful. Don't hurt yourself."

Liora looked up to find that Tiona had poked her head out the window.

"Miss Tiona... It's... Dangerous. Please don't... Lean out too much," she said before glancing at the hard ground. It was a long way down. If she fell... She probably wouldn't be getting back up.

The two of them had been locked up in a place known as the Stargazing Room, which was on the top floor of the tower that rose from the north side of the school building. Being the highest location within the academy grounds, once its only door was barred, getting out was next to impossible. Though there were windows, their abductors had likely figured that they couldn't possibly be insane enough to attempt escape by way of free fall. What their abductors had overlooked, however, was the presence of Liora.

Born and raised in the forest, the Lulu were a tribe of extremely athletic people. They began hunting at a young age, and with skills such as tree climbing being second nature for them, they had no fear of heights. She quickly slid down the wall and, before long, had her feet firmly on the ground. After making her escape, she sought help from the first person she ran into.

"Miss Tiona... Is locked up," she said to Anne, who could barely believe what she was hearing.

"Locked up...? What do you mean? By who?"

And, she wondered, for what?

"I don't know... I got away... But only me," she said, frustration evident on her face. Then, she looked up at Anne, the gaze of her watery eyes desperate and pleading. "Please! Help Miss Tiona... Save her... Please!"

“All right. I’ll do what I can to help.”

To Anne’s great surprise, she immediately heard the sound of her own voice. She’d meant to hesitate, but the words had left her first.

Wow, I okayed her without even a second thought...

Such a statement would have been unthinkable for the Anne of old, and she knew exactly what had caused her to change.

Princess Mia has trusted me to exercise my judgment. In return, I need to act in a manner that will uphold her good name.

She thought of her petite master: her overflowing kindness and her strong sense of justice. In doing so, she felt a growing conviction that if Mia were here, she would undoubtedly have done the same. The princess would tolerate no doubt and allow no hesitation.

For the record, her assumption was actually correct. Had Mia been there in place of Anne, she would certainly have committed to helping Tiona. Overflowing kindness and strong sense of justice — in addition to being figments of Anne’s imagination — were of course completely irrelevant. Mia’s real motive was simple: she was a chicken. That’s all there is to it.

Fearing the ever-looming threat of the guillotine, she couldn’t possibly ignore such a plea. Furthermore, the thought of betraying her loyal maid’s expectations would weigh too heavily on even her feeble conscience. So, she would have no choice but to swallow her reservations, grit her teeth, and curse the sardonic whims of fate as she went to help her mortal nemesis. In that moment, the minds of master and servant truly became one. Their hearts, though, couldn’t be further apart.

Led by Liora, Anne made her way to the school building. Under the veil of nightfall, the inside of the academy was a quiet place, vast and empty. In the absence of lectures, few students chose to remain in the halls. Tonight, it was especially deserted, as the students were all at the party, and their attendants were either waiting in their rooms or, like Anne, granted leave to roam around town. The abandoned premises of the school building became the perfect location to carry out a nefarious plot.

Up and up they climbed the spiralling staircase of the northern tower, eventually arriving at a narrow hallway. It was dim, and Anne could just barely make out the shadow of something moving

at the other end.

"What's—"

"Shush! Be... Wary. They're... Guards."

"Guards...?"

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she saw them clearly. Two men were standing in front of the entrance to the Stargazing Room. They were too far away for her to see their faces, but their large frames suggested direct confrontation would be unwise. She'd heard that some attendants were expert fighters trained to protect their masters, and she might have just run into two of them.

"What should we do..."

Unfortunately, Anne was no martial artist. Punching and kicking her way through the two men was definitely unadvisable. Even if they weren't trained fighters, she'd still have no chance. With violence out of the question, that left diplomacy, which under the circumstances seemed like a very shaky option as well.

"What should we do... What should we do..." murmured Anne, her tone growing increasingly anxious with each passing moment. Then, all of a sudden, a voice rose from behind her.

"Well oh well, what do we have here? Can I help you ladies?"

Both Liora and Anne jumped and spun on their feet to find a man standing over them.

"Trouble, I presume?" he asked, glancing over their shoulders.

"You're..."

"I saw you with... Prince Sion."

"You're... Keithwood, right?"

He flashed them a friendly smile.

"Honored to know that you remembered, Miss Anne. I hope Her Highness is well?" he said before turning his smile toward Liora. "And your friend there is from the Empire as well?"

"Ah, yes... Um... She's maid to the daughter of the Outland Count of Rudolvon. Her name is..."

"Liora Lulu. Please... Help Miss Tiona!"

After being apprised of the situation, Keithwood crossed his arms and said softly, "Two on the outside, huh. How many inside?"

"I don't know... But we were... Locked inside... By four people... Men and women."

"Which means they either realized you escaped and are guarding from the inside as well, or they kept two guys watching the door and the other two went somewhere else. In any case,

milord will roast me alive if he hears I left two distressed damsels to fend for themselves. Count me in, ladies."

"Really? Thank God... And thank you!"

"But what are you going to do?" asked Anne, wondering if Keithwood had a plan in mind. Perhaps he was going to sneak up and then... do something sneaky and...

"What are we going to do? Simple. We're going to save the good lady from the clutches of evil. That's all," replied Keithwood. His tone was as casual as ever, but his grin now showed teeth.

The rest all happened in a blur, and only after everything was finished did Anne remember to put her hand over her wide-open mouth.

Keithwood dashed up to the guards, his footsteps eerily silent. Using that momentum, he drove his knee into one guard's gut. The man crumpled. Then, he grabbed the arm of the other guard, still frozen with shock, and slammed him to the ground. In the span of a breath, the battle was over.

"Um... Can all male attendants... do stuff like that?" asked an incredulous Anne.

"Hah! Let's just say I'm a bit of an exception," answered Keithwood with a wry grin before adding with a shrug, "It helps when your employer is a sense of justice that grew legs and started walking."

While the two of them bantered, Liora rushed past them and pushed open the door.

"Miss Tiona! Are you okay?!"

"Liora? Are you?!"

Fortunately, when Tiona came out of the room, they were glad to discover that she hadn't been hurt.

"Miss Rudolvon, it's good to see that you're unharmed."

"You're... Princess Mia's...?"

"When I went back to my room, my dress was gone."

According to Tiona, when she and Liora returned to their room, they found it ransacked. The perpetrators had left behind a message telling them to come to the north tower of the school building if they wanted the dress back.

"That's terrible... Who would do such a thing..."

"Odds are they're acquaintances of either yours or Her Highness's," Keithwood replied.

“Huh? How come?”

“Here, I found this on one of the guards outside. Take a look.”

Keithwood held out a handkerchief embroidered with a pattern that was unmistakably the crest of the Tearmoon Empire.

“How could...”

“I’d wager they were servants of nobles from the Empire.”

The discovery came as a shock to Anne. She’d thought for sure it was the doing of those noble girls who’d bullied Tiona the other day.

“They told me to stay away from the party... because I’d be a disgrace to the *real* nobles of the Empire.”

Her voice was soft. There was no seething anger, no indignant rage. There was only a quiet sadness in her expression as she held out the bundle of cloth she’d been carrying close to her chest. It was her dress, now in tatters.

“...Unbelievable,” breathed Anne.

“Still, this was one hell of a big risk you took. I know the dress is important, ladies, but coming here by yourselves? Not smart,” Keithwood said, his eyes narrowingly reproachfully.

Tiona responded with a shake of her head and a wistful smile.

“The Rudolvons do not have the means to furnish me with multiple dresses.”

Then, she let out a resigned sigh.

“That’s why I told you not to, Liora, but you just hopped out the window... There was no need for you to be so upset,” she said, glancing down at the remains of her dress. “There was no point in getting out quickly anymore.”

“Miss Tiona...” Liora’s eyes never left her master, but little by little, her lip began to quiver and she bit it to make it stop.

Anne’s heart ached for the other maid. She knew what it was like. Had she been in the same spot... If the one locked in here had been Mia... The sheer anguish would be overwhelming. She opened her palm, which held the money Mia had trusted her with.

“Liora, please go to the store and buy a dress. Here’s the money.” Without a second thought, she pressed the coins into Liora’s hand.

“This... is...?”

“Princess Mia entrusted me with it,” she said, unwavering in her conviction that Mia would have done just the same. “In the meantime, Miss Tiona, let’s get your makeup redone. Your eyeliner

is starting to run from all the tears!"

Just as Anne was about to get to work, Keithwood spoke up.

"Hey, just a friendly reminder. As Her Highness's maid, are you sure you want to be helping?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Her Highness sits at the very top of Tearmoon and reigns over all the Empire's nobles. If the ones who locked Lady Tiona in here are *also* Tearmoon nobility... wouldn't that suggest the possibility that this could have all been Her Highness's doing to begin with?"

"...Huh?"

Anne scratched her head, baffled by Keithwood's proposition.

Let us jump to the other timeline for a moment.

In the old timeline, the incident of Tiona's brief imprisonment also occurred. On the day of the party, the captive Tiona was rescued and arrived late to the ballroom. She would then go on to receive a request from Prince Sion to dance, perform brilliantly on the floor, and earn the respect and admiration of many of her peers. A significant difference between the two timelines was that in the old one, Anne was not present during the rescue.

Previously, the maid Mia had brought with her was a third daughter of one of the central noble houses. While obedient, she was far from a hard worker, and she was off enjoying a tea party with her friends during the dance. Tiona's rescue was, therefore, carried out by only Liora and Keithwood. Then, faced with the problem of the shredded dress, they sought help from the most authoritative figure in the academy, Rafina Belluga. It was this critical moment when their paths crossed, leading to the formation of a strong coalition between Tearmoon's future revolutionary leader, Tiona; her collaborator, Prince Sion; and finally, their powerful backer, Saint Rafina. Suspecting the Empire was behind it all, they looked to the top of its noble hierarchy. There, they found their most probable enemy — the reigning princess of Tearmoon: Mia.

Though Mia would later learn of the accusations against her, she never bothered to clear her name. Suspicions arising from the mistreatment of a mere Outland noble's daughter seemed too trifling a matter to deserve her attention. It was normal for nobles to oppress commoners. Surely, she figured, central nobility oppressing a nameless noble from some backwater county was

equally unworthy of mention.

It's hard to say when exactly the fire of the revolution first sparked to life. Some claimed the famine to be the cause, while others blamed the tyranny of high nobility and the incompetence of the Emperor. However, if there were a sequence of events that permanently sealed Mia's bloody fate, this incident was undoubtedly the first in the chain.

History was already sweeping Mia up in its powerful currents, pushing her steadily toward the guillotine. Faced with a mighty torrent that was surging toward the cliffs of oblivion, Anne stood boldly in its path.

"You think Princess Mia... is the culprit?"

She blinked once.

"What are you even talking about? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

Anne broke out into laughter. The comment should have been insulting, but its sheer absurdity pushed it into the realm of comedy.

"Please, Keithwood, you can't possibly be serious."

Well oh well, not a shred of doubt, huh... Keithwood found himself impressed by Anne's reaction. *I see the princess has a firm grip on the hearts of her attendants.*

In truth, Keithwood didn't think Mia was the culprit, either. As a precaution, however, he decided to test Anne's reaction, just in case.

"U-Um, Keithwood, personally, I don't think Her Highness would do something like this, either," added Tiona as well.

"Duly noted. If the victim herself believes as much, then let it be so."

He shrugged, then noticed that Anne was fidgeting as if she had something to say. Eventually, with great hesitance, she said, "Um, Keithwood, I was thinking... I'm not sure how it works in your kingdom, but if the people there believe that those who rule should also be accountable for the actions of their subjects, then in that sense, I guess you could say Princess Mia is responsible for what these Tearmoon nobles did."

This line of reasoning was, by the strangest coincidence, the exact same logic that led to Rafina's disdain for Mia in the previous timeline. Back then, Rafina also did not believe Mia to be directly responsible for the incident. However, she was gravely disappointed

to see that Mia, whose position should have obligated her to denounce such injustice toward the weak, chose the tacit permission of silence. In Rafina's eyes, Mia had, there and then, shown herself to be unfit to rule. This stain on her name followed Mia throughout her time at the academy, ultimately robbing her of the chance to befriend Rafina.

"That's why — at the risk of overstepping — I'd like to take responsibility for this incident on behalf of Princess Mia. As her aide and assistant, my duty is to do as she wills. I must act as though I were her arms and legs. Therefore, to redress this situation, I promise to deliver Miss Tiona to the ballroom if it's the last thing I do!"

In this passionate speech, Anne proudly declared herself to be Mia's proxy — her "arms and legs." Which, from Mia's perspective, would have been nothing short of horrifying, considering her limbs had apparently grown a will of their own and were now in the process of helping her mortal nemesis.

"Miss Tiona, take a seat over there. I'm going to redo your makeup."

Anne was incredibly fast in her work, her hands moving with the confident deftness of experience. After all, she'd just finished doing the exact same thing for Mia, twice. It occurred to her that, arguably, she'd ended up using her master as practice.

Oh wow... Princess Mia... Did she see this coming? Is that why she had me practice on her beforehand? She paused for a second. *Eh... On second thought, that can't be true.*

Of course it wasn't. Even Anne, who was suffering from late stage Mia-itis, managed to figure out that much. The fact that it took a second thought, though... did not bode well for her prognosis.

Princess Mia placed her trust in me. That means I need to do my very best...

Thus, Mia's "arms and legs" — of their own eager volition — took the bull of fate by the horns and wrestled it onto a different path, forever changing the course of history.

Chapter 38: A Maid Behind the Scenes — Outcome

Just before Tiona — now beautifully dressed once more — was getting ready to leave, Keithwood handed her a small note.

"Terribly sorry to trouble you with this, Miss Rudolvon, but would you mind giving this to milord, Prince Sion?"

"Huh? Uh, I certainly will," she answered with a nod before heading off to the ballroom.

Tiona arrived late, but no one paid her any mind. The reason being that she had appeared just as Mia and Sion were finishing their dance. Everyone in the room was mesmerized by their performance, allowing Tiona to walk in without attracting any attention.

Once the dance concluded, Sion was immediately mobbed by a bunch of girls. Tiona was intimidated at the thought of wading into a group like that, but she took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and strode in.

"Um, excuse me..."

"Hm? Ah, I believe we've met before. Your name is..."

"Tiona Rudolvon. I'm sorry to bother you, Prince Sion, but um, Keithwood told me to give you this..."

"Did he? Hm, excuse me."

After putting some distance between himself and his encircling group of girls, Sion quickly read through the note. It summarized the incident and the likely culprits. Furthermore, it also mentioned that it would be prudent to consider the possibility of Mia's involvement, if only out of an abundance of caution.

Hah, abundance of caution indeed. You're too careful for your own good sometimes, Keithwood.

Sion smiled and shook his head. It was Keithwood's job to broaden his perspective by pointing out possibilities that he hadn't considered. Therefore, anyone for whom he harbored affection had

to be scrutinized with the utmost rigor. It was likely that, on a personal level, Keithwood didn't actually suspect Mia of being involved.

Heck, I'm pretty sure she's the kind of person that even he couldn't help but be fond of.

Nevertheless, Keithwood remained objective, choosing to commit himself to the continued presentation of facts for Sion's consideration. Through his steadfast attitude, one could glimpse a man whose competence stemmed not from natural genius but dogged diligence — a true workhorse of a man.

With that said...

Sion thought back to the way Mia had declined his offer for a second dance. She'd almost certainly spotted Tiona during their dance. A single look was probably all she needed to more or less figure out what had happened. Then, in an attempt to have the poor girl at least enjoy the party now that she was here, she'd entrusted Tiona to him. Normally, Mia might have gone to look after Tiona herself, but at a ball, the simplest solution was for a male partner to take the lead.

A more suitable partner for me, huh... In other words, there's someone here who needs my help.

Though the wording was a tad roundabout, the meaning was clear, and it was a request that Sion couldn't refuse.

Still, my dear princess... Phrasing. *Next time, you might wish to consider the nuances of the word, "suitable."*

Feeling like he'd just found a chink in the armor of perfection that was Mia, Sion couldn't help but break into a grin.

"Um, Prince Sion?"

"Hm? Ah, ahem, my apologies. Miss Rudolvon, may I have the honor of joining you for the next number?"

And so ensued a night of music and dancing.

The next morning, Mia woke up feeling terrific. Last night, after working up a good sweat from all the dancing, she'd enjoyed a long, luxurious soak in the bath. Then, with the comfortable fatigue of a good workout permeating her from head to toe, she'd crawled into her fluffy bed and slept like a rock until daybreak. It was, without a doubt, the ideal kind of sleep. Upon waking, she found herself fully energized and in great spirits. Humming happily to herself, she strolled into the cafeteria wondering what was on the

menu for today. When she took a seat and sent Anne off to order her meal, however, she frowned.

Hm?

A young man approached Anne. He had rugged features and a sharp gaze. Dressed exquisitely in all black, he looked to be an attendant to one of the academy's students. There was an elegance to the way he conducted himself, and Mia considered him rather charming. Had he been just some regular good-looking fellow, Mia wouldn't have given him a second thought. The most she'd have done was to give Anne a knowing wink and a pat on the back. However, he happened to be the attendant of her archnemesis, Prince Sion, and that changed things.

Worse yet was the fact that he was accompanied by another girl. Her unique features were undeniably those of an ethnic minority within the Empire, and Mia knew her to be Tiona Rudolvon's attendant, Liora.

To this day, Mia could still remember the hate in the girl's eyes as she pointed an arrow at her face. It was a scene from the previous timeline that was burned into her memory.

Wh-Why in the moons is Anne talking with them like they're friends?!

Mia asked Anne about it when she returned.

"I was going to tell you about it later, but..." said Anne as she hesitantly began to recount the events of the past day. When she had finished...

"..."

Mia didn't make a sound. Anne kept waiting and waiting, but Mia remained eerily still. Then, little by little, her small body began to tilt.

"Princess Mia!"

Mia toppled over sideways like a log, her face pale as the moon.

Chapter 39: Princess Mia… Hits Peak Mental Performance!

Crimson flames raged above a burning capital… People, their voices filled with hate, yelled and yelled and yelled. Then, her own head rolling onto the ground…

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Mia sprung awake with a scream to find herself on a bed in the school infirmary, soaked through with sweat. It had been a while since she'd dreamed about her own execution, and the dreadful sensation of death yet lingered. Her wet clothes stuck uncomfortably to her skin, and she desperately wanted to take a bath. Now, however, was not the time. She called Anne over, who'd been watching over her with a look of deep concern, and immediately gave her a set of instructions to carry out.

The first thing Mia did was to forcibly send the four attendants who'd directly participated in the incident back to the Empire. Immediately, their student masters showed up to protest. She shot them a harsh glance.

This is it. It's make or break.

Mia fully understood her situation. One wrong step here, and she'd be in dire straits. After waking up in the infirmary and sending off Anne, she'd immediately grabbed the bloody diary she'd brought with her. A couple of pages in, she'd found that there was indeed mention of the incident of Tiona's imprisonment. She had no idea what it was really all about when she'd first written it down. Never could she have even begun to imagine that so much had been happening behind the scenes.

This wasn't something she could hand-wave. Withholding punishment would almost certainly anger Rafina, and neither Prince Sion nor Tiona would think very highly of her either. Therefore, she needed to clearly denounce the culprits and discipline them for their actions. The problem was their masters.

While they all denied involvement, she doubted any of them were truly innocent. In her opinion, they'd all dipped at least their toes in, if not the whole lower half of their bodies. One issue, however, made it impossible to say for certain that they were personally involved.

Normally, if the attendants were commoners, there was no way they'd abduct and confine a noble girl without direct orders. The problem was that all the perpetrating attendants were themselves nobles. None of them were heirs to their realms, but they'd all grown up as central nobility, admired and respected by their peers. If there was one thing they'd gained from their upbringing, it was a generous helping of pride.

I figured as much, judging by the fact that they all carry at least something that bears the Imperial Crest.

If Mia was being honest, the thing that she most wanted to yell in their faces was something along the lines of *if you're going to do something bad, at least hide the damn crests!* That way, at least people wouldn't know where they were from...

In any case, they, and their egos, probably couldn't live down the fact that a "backwater noble" like Tiona got to go to the welcoming party while they didn't. Unlike their masters, the attendants actually had a motive.

"Your Highness, we find this too difficult to accept. Our attendants... all they did was lock up some backwater noble girl for a while..."

Their protests reflected the beliefs of Tearmoon nobility. The tyranny of the central houses was tolerated not only against commoners, but nobles from remote regions as well.

They're sowing the seeds of so much hate, and yet they have no idea.

Mia regarded them not with hate but pity. She pitied them, because like them, she had been equally ignorant until she found herself in a dungeon. It was the kind of thing that she'd never have realized without hitting rock bottom, and yet, once she did, it was far too late...

To sow the seeds of hatred is to reap their fruits. I can lecture them... Mia sighed and shook her head. *But I can tell it'll go right over their heads.*

"I see... I understand what you are trying to say. In fact, it might very well be true... were we still in Tearmoon."

“Huh?”

“You need to consider who has authority over this academy. Who... is its *ruler*?”

Mia had a plan. If she were to judge them based on her own values, they would hold a grudge against her. To avoid this, she could push the responsibility onto someone else. And what better person to take the blame than the academy’s reigning figure of authority, Rafina Orca Belluga?

“Miss Rafina is a person of most noble character. Do you think she would condone such thuggery toward one of the academy’s precious students?” She took a moment to pause and close her eyes. “And, I must admit, I am not fond of your approach either. Ganging up on the weak and bullying them... There is nothing noble about such behavior.”

A part of her was being honest. She knew what it was like to be ganged up on and bullied. Having experienced this at the hands of the revolutionary army, she could no longer bear the thought of doing the same to others. Violence hurt the body, and derision hurt the soul. Both felt terrible. She didn’t wish that on anyone, and she didn’t want it done to her.

“Normally, I would require all of you to take responsibility for this incident as well and surrender your student status. However, I find such treatment overly cruel.”

“Your Highness...”

“For this time only, I shall ask a personal favor of Miss Rafina to forgive you for your actions,” she added, making sure to clarify that this was an act of kindness which awaited repayment.

This way, she’d be able to punish them while simultaneously making them feel indebted to her.

I sure hope with this, things will settle down and everyone will just move on.

Feeling particularly drained by the exchange, Mia nevertheless dragged her tired self out of the room to go request an audience with Rafina.

Chapter 40: The First Friend!

Trying very hard to ignore the swarm of bees in her stomach, Mia walked into the classroom during lunch break.

“Um, Miss Rafina, may I have a moment?” she asked with a nervous smile. Her voice cracked a little.

“Hm? Oh, Mia.” Rafina looked up from her desk and, seeing it was Mia, stood up to greet her. “What is it?”

She was wearing her usual polite smile, but that was cold comfort to Mia. After all, they didn’t call her a saint for nothing; her face defaulted to a smile. She could be sentencing Mia to the guillotine and still look the same. One could never be too careful around her.

“There’s something I’d like to discuss with you...” asked Mia as she peered timidly up at Rafina.

“Is there? In that case, why don’t you come join me in my room? I was just about to have lunch,” Rafina responded, her voice smooth and calm as always.

Once they entered her room, she suddenly clapped her hands once and turned to Mia.

“Gosh, I just remembered! Thank you very much for your gifts. The staff loved them very much,” she said happily.

Mia smiled back, both out of relief that Rafina was in a good mood as well as to hide the fact that she had absolutely no idea what gifts she was referring to. They were, of course, from Anne, who hadn’t informed Mia about them yet.

Thank the moons. At this rate, I might actually survive this encounter...

Once they took their seats and laid their lunches on the table, Mia slowly turned toward Rafina and, without any hesitation, humbly bowed her head.

“I’m terribly sorry for what happened.”

This was a potential guillotine moment; her ego could wait.

“Please, Princess Mia, you do not need to apologize. It was not your doing, correct?”

“No, but as Tearmoon’s Princess, I am responsible for the actions of its nobles,” said Mia, trying to sound as earnest as possible. It took some effort, because in the back of her mind, she was thinking *Of course not! It’s got nothing to do with me! I didn’t even know it happened!*

“I see. Then, as for disciplinary action... What did you have in mind?”

“I have already ordered the culpable attendants to be sent back to Tearmoon. As for their student masters, due to a lack of clear evidence indicating their direct involvement, I have asked them to engage in self-reflection and remain vigilant against such behavior in the future.”

Rafina’s eyes narrowed immediately.

“That seems rather lenient of you.”

Eeeek!

The student council president’s piercing gaze sent a terrible chill up Mia’s spine, and she instantly regretted letting the student masters off so easily. Alas, it was far too late to reverse her decision. At this point, she had no choice but to argue the merit of her lax sentence.

“It would appear, Princess Mia, that you are a very merciful individual.”

M-Merci— Merciful moons! What do I do?! I’m in so much trouble!

Mia felt like a kitten who’d wandered into a lumbering lion and been fixed with a hungry glare. With her neck on the line, she desperately looked for a way out of this predicament. Unfortunately, having already hit peak mental performance previously, her brain was now overheating and refused to serve up any ideas. Just then, she noticed the bowl of soup on the table. A piece of something yellow protruded from its surface. It was her old friend, the ambermoon tomato.

The face of the Empire’s head chef popped into her mind. She remembered how she’d hated ambermoon tomatoes, how he’d stubbornly kept serving them to her, and how he’d labored to work them into something she’d like...

“Ah, ambermoon tomatoes... ” she murmured to herself. “How ironic that their pungency often leads to their wastage... yet remorse for this sin only comes after there is nothing left to eat...”

She recalled the first time she’d tasted them after being reincarnated. The thought that she’d previously thrown away such

meticulously prepared food — and all the care and dedication that went into it — made her grimace. It was a stark reminder of how terrible a person she'd been.

...Wait! This is not the time to be getting nostalgic! I need to face reality!

"So... you mean to say that people do bad things because they're not aware they're wrong?"

"...Huh?"

"And in this case, there was little actual harm done, making the victim's redress a much simpler matter. Of course, I see now... So that's why you sent your most trusted aide, Anne..."

Rafina's attitude changed visibly. She smiled again, but this time, it was much gentler than before.

Punishment serves two purposes. The first is to provide emotional solace for the victim. The second is to encourage reflection in the offender. In this case, Anne's efforts had kept the harm done to a minimum.

"Allowing us to focus on promoting reflection in the offenders, after which they will hopefully learn and mature... Indeed, that may very well be the course of action that more befits an institute of learning."

"A-Absolutely!"

Mia jumped on it. She didn't know what it was, but she jumped anyway — whatever would get her out of this predicament.

"Mia," Rafina said as she took Mia's hands in hers, "you have my honest admiration and respect. There is a profound mercy in you. It pushes you to seek the redemption of even the wicked, and it is something that I do not have. I see now why they refer to you as the Great Sage of the Empire."

"I-I'm honored to hear that," Mia said with a nervous smile. Being overly praised wasn't comfortable either.

"And, well... Y-You see, about that..."

Rafina suddenly began to stammer.

Th-There's more?! What now?!

Resisting the urge to dash out of the room right then and there, Mia kept listening. Rafina's next words, however, took her completely by surprise.

"Um... Would you... like to be my friend?"

"Would I... what?"

From that day on, Mia gained a friend: the daughter of the

Duke of Belluga, Rafina.

After saying goodbye to Rafina and returning to her room, Mia took the time to heap a ton of praise upon Anne. Then, before the poor maid had even recovered from being hit with a sudden outpouring of gratitude, she'd already been dragged out to town in the name of rewarding her for her efforts. Thus ensued Mia and Anne's quest to try all the sweets in town, but that is a story for another time.

Chapter 41: Classes Begin!

Two days after the party there was an orientation for new students. Once that concluded, it was time for classes to begin. It was a period of many new beginnings: a new life, a new environment, and a new educational experience. Unfamiliarity breeds uncertainty, and the classrooms filled with nervous tension as the students filed in for the first time. As Mia sat down and looked around at her anxious peers, she couldn't help but crack a confident smile. And why wouldn't she? She'd been through this once already, and she'd learned all the course materials ages ago. And not just the concepts, mind you; she'd gone as far as using them in applied questions.

Mm hm hm. This will be a walk in the park!

Mia was so confident, in fact, that she turned to a couple of her classmates and told them, "If there's anything you don't understand, feel free to ask me! I'll explain it to you!"

She was just setting herself up to take a harder fall...

A few minutes in, she noticed something wasn't right.

"M-My, how odd..."

A drop of sweat rolled down her forehead.

I don't remember any of this at all.

Mia had completely forgotten that she'd never been a good student. Rather, she'd been born with the one trait that all politicians possess: the ability to conveniently forget things that are bad for their careers. For the record, back in Tearmoon, she'd studied up on the topics that seemed necessary for avoiding the guillotine in the future, but that was far from a comprehensive education. She didn't know nearly enough to be impressive to her classmates. Math, in particular, proved terribly challenging. As an uncommitted arts student — that is, having reluctantly chosen the arts due to an ineptitude in the sciences — the mere mention of arithmetics made her head spin.

M-M-Me and my big mouth!

Mia panicked. After all she'd said, not knowing the answer

would be seriously humiliating! As soon as classes ended, she slipped out of the room before anyone had a chance to speak to her.

"Anne! Anne!" she yelled as she burst into her room.

"What's wrong, Princess Mia?" Anne wheeled around in surprise.

"Anne, starting tomorrow, you're coming with me to math class."

"What?"

Saint-Noel Academy had a policy allowing attendants to accompany their masters to class. Many students brought attendants who had excelled at their own schooling. They would then sit with their masters and help them with their studies. Anne, however, hesitated. Unlike those attendants, she wasn't well-educated. Seeing her struggle to answer, Mia took a moment to think.

"Ah, of course, if you come to class, feel free to cut down on your workload accordingly. You can clean the room once every two days, for example. I'll even help you."

"What? No! That's not okay at all! If I go, I'm still going to make sure I get all my work done as well!"

"Um, but then you can't help me study."

"Huh?"

"Uh, I mean..."

Mia trailed off, realizing she'd slipped up. Even she had a sense of pride. Anne trusted her, believed in her, and even admired her. The last thing she wanted to do was to say to Anne, "Can you go learn all the subjects I'm bad at and just teach me how to do them later?" After a long while, she finally came up with an excuse.

"I-I do believe arithmetics will come in handy for you in the future."

She wasn't wrong. Arithmetics would indeed be very useful. It was a necessary skill to do any form of business, and teachings in Saint-Noel were based on the most contemporary knowledge in the field. If Anne studied well, she'd be highly valued by all sorts of people.

"P-Princess Mia... You... For me..." said Anne, growing teary-eyed. "Thank you very much for this opportunity. I won't let you down."

"C-Certainly..." Mia stammered. Every word of Anne's earnest gratitude stabbed at her conscience. "D-Don't think anything of it. Besides, I'm also having a little trouble keeping up, so I'd appreciate

a little help from you in class."

The chickenhearted Mia cracked under the weight of her own guilt. In order to make herself feel better, she slipped in a bit of her real motive at the end.

"Princess Mia..."

To Anne, though, it just sounded like nothing more than a hasty attempt at modesty. For a commoner, the thought of attending classes at Saint-Noel — not just for free, but getting paid while doing so — was absolutely unthinkable. It was an act of profound benevolence that moved her beyond words. In that moment, she was ready to devote herself to Mia for the rest of her life. Come rain or come shine, in sickness and in health, wherever Mia went, she was going to follow. Even if Mia married into a foreign kingdom, she was ready to serve her there until the very end.

She knew, however, that these were ultimately her own thoughts. There might come a day when she would resign from her role as Mia's personal maid-in-waiting. This arrangement was likely a subtle way of preparing her for that possibility, so that if she ever needed to set out on her own, she would have the knowledge and skills necessary to sustain herself.

Unless...

A second possibility occurred to Anne.

What if Mia was serious when she called Anne her right hand and confidante? And she wanted her right hand to have sufficient knowledge to support her in future endeavors? Responsibility and trust went hand in hand.

Perhaps the greater responsibilities Mia was placing on her were a sign of deepening trust. Though she knew this to be an overly optimistic interpretation...

"Trust me, Princess Mia. I will do my absolute best."

...Her motivation nonetheless went through the roof.

Chapter 42: Princess Mia Tries Joining a Club

Saint-Noel Academy was home to a myriad of clubs. Some were focused on academic research and inquiry. Others were for the betterment of technique in swords- or spearmanship. There were even clubs devoted entirely to pastimes and hobbies, such as the Tea Party Club, which was extremely popular among the academy's female population. Outside of classes, a wide variety of activities were available to satisfy the fancies of these students used to lives of luxury.

It just so happened that one of these clubs caught Mia's interest.

"Ah-hah! Found it," said Mia as she walked up to the stable. "Hm. As expected of Saint-Noel. Very impressive."

The stable housed over thirty horses, which was enough to field an entire squad of the Imperial Guard in Tearmoon. While the petite princess strolled around peering curiously at the animals, all the other students of the horsemanship club broke into a nervous sweat.

Female students rarely came to the stable. The unique odor of horses was foreign to the island, and many girls found it rather foul. What, then, could possibly have brought the Princess of the mighty Tearmoon Empire to a place like this? Figuring that whatever it was, it must be no laughing matter, nobody in the vicinity could work up the nerve to ask.

Nobody except one young man.

"Hey, miss, what're you doing around here? Get lost or something?" he asked, completely undaunted by Mia's presence.

She turned in his direction to find that she recognized him. He was a second year student of the academy's senior division, making him four years older than her. His frame was thick and muscular, and he had a healthy tan to his skin.

"My... I do believe you were the one who was walking the

horses on the day of the party."

"Oh, you're the miss from that time," he said as he gave his forehead a firm slap and let out a hearty laugh. Clearly, he remembered the time when Mia had the misfortune of being sneezed on by a horse right before the party. The offending horse was one of his. "Sorry about that. I'm the leader of the horsemanship club. Second year senior. The name's Lin Malong."

"I am Mia Luna Tearmoon." As always, she tugged at her skirt and performed a curtsy. "Judging by your name, I presume you're from the Kingdom of Equestria?"

"Dang, gotta say it's an honor that the Tearmoon princess knows my name," said Malong with a grin. Then his expression suddenly turned serious. "So? What's the deal? Still got some hard feelings about the other day? Don't tell me you want that horse dead or something."

There had been a time in the past when a female student had shown up screaming about how she'd had a terrible experience with one of the horses, going as far as to demand that it be killed. Angry complaints were one thing, but harming the horses would be out of the question. He looked at Mia. If she went that far...

"Hm? Why would I want the horse dead?"

"Uh, I mean, she ruined your dress, didn't she?"

"The dress?"

There was a pause. Then, Mia laughed as though she'd just heard something absurd.

"Oh, please. Why would I possibly want to have a horse killed over a dress?"

For Mia, it was extremely obvious which one was more valuable. A dress couldn't help her run from the revolutionary army. A horse could.

"I just came today to take a look at the club and see what you do here."

She wanted to learn how to ride horses, and she had a very compelling reason. Back when the revolutionary army was after her, she'd tried to escape by horse cart, only to discover that even the strongest horses couldn't outrun horsemen if they were pulling a heavy cart. Consequently, it didn't take long for them to capture her. While not having a revolution would be most ideal, if it happened, she needed to be able to make a swift escape to the neighbouring kingdoms. To that end, she had to learn how to ride a

horse herself. Between the guillotine and some horse snot, she'd gladly choose the latter. So long as the horse carried her to safety, she could easily overlook the fact that it had once used her as a handkerchief.

That's right. Mia had learned to forgive, and for her, that was a big step.

"Take a look, huh..."

Malong scratched his chin. Unlike the people of Equestria, who were said to have been born and raised on horseback, Mia was from Tearmoon. He couldn't fathom why the princess of such a mighty empire would be interested in the Horsemanship Club.

Amongst polite society, horse riding was not considered a noble pastime. Horsemanship was a practical skill with a very specific purpose — to conduct warfare. It was military in nature. While the ability to ride warhorses into combat might be valuable for boys, it was arguably an entirely useless skill for a girl. Granted, there was occasionally the odd girl who expressed interest in hunting, but... A glance at Mia's arms told Malong that she was no archer.

"You can look all you want, but are you thinking of joining the club?"

"If I do, will I be able to learn how to ride a horse?"

"Well, sure... But do you want to ride a horse?"

"I certainly do."

"...Why?"

"Because it can take me somewhere far..." Mia gazed into the distance. "As far as I want to go."

Ideally, so far that no revolutionary army could ever get to her. Horses were, in her opinion, her most practical method of escape.

"Somewhere far, huh..."

Mia's words struck a chord with Malong. She spoke of a truth known to every Equestrian since childhood. Horses elevated their riders, allowing them to strive higher and farther than they could alone. On the back of a horse, no distance was beyond your reach. They were partners who offered the freedom to, as she had said, go as far as one wanted to go. It was a sentiment that would never be voiced by those who viewed horses as nothing more than instruments of war or pets to pamper.

No mere princess, huh... Looks like this miss here is more than meets the eye.

Just then, Mia heard a voice,

“Princess Mia? What are you doing here?”
Which sounded rather familiar.

Chapter 43: Horseback Panic

"Princess Mia? What are you doing here?"

"My, Prince Abel? What a coincidence."

Mia's eyes widened a little in surprise. She hadn't expected to see Abel here. Digging through her memories of the previous timeline, she recalled that Abel had been a member of the card game club — which she'd actually considered joining herself in an attempt to better acquaint herself with him. However, upon discovering that the club was actually comprised of a bunch of good-for-nothings who spent all day gambling, Anne adamantly refused to let her anywhere near it.

I thought for sure he'd be loafing around like his fellow degenerates.

The Abel of old resurfaced in her mind. She remembered how his face had always looked a little pallid. Everything about him, from his listless smile and flippant laugh to the sloppy way he wore his uniform, spoke of someone who did not take his life seriously. And yet...

"Did you join the horsemanship club?"

"Hm? Oh, uh, yes. I figured that since I'm, you know, technically a prince of Remno, I'd at least try to get my horse- and swordsmanship brushed up."

...The face she saw now was nothing like the one she remembered. There was no degeneracy in his spirited smile, and his neatly-worn riding clothes exuded an aura of vitality.

"And what brings you here?"

"I was curious about horsemanship, so I came to take a look around."

"You? Horsemanship? Well, that's not what I expected to hear..."

"Hey, Abel, you're a friend of the miss here?"

"Ah, Malong. Yes, I had the good fortune to be her partner for the party the other night."

"You don't say. Good timing, then. Here, why don't you take the miss for a ride?"

"...What?"

Abel blinked a few times.

"She was curious enough to come all the way here. Can't have her leaving empty-handed now, can we?" said Malong with a suggestive wink.

"But..."

Abel took a quick glance at Mia before immediately looking away. His cheeks turned ever-so-slightly pink.

My, is that...

Which did not escape Mia's notice.

Now would you look at that. He's embarrassed to get on a horse with me!

She could see why Abel was getting nervous. Riding a horse in tandem *was* rather intimate.

Oh ho ho, now isn't he just the sweetest thing!

Her inner twenty year old reared its head, and she regarded him with a look of haughty worldliness. Though she'd never been in a relationship, she was a *grown woman* — provided you count the previous timeline. The mind of a mere tween could hardly pose a challenge for her. She knew she was reading this boy like a book.

For the record, her hunch was actually right this time, but it should definitely be attributed to beginner's luck and not romantic insight.

In that case, I suppose I'll have to take the lead here. I am *the older and more mature one, after all.*

Feeling rather good about herself, she smiled at him.

"I'd appreciate it very much if you could, Prince Abel. We barely got to know each other at the party. I'd love to have the chance to talk some more," she said, shamelessly angling her head down so that she was looking up at him with wide, limpid eyes.

"Uh, well, I mean... If you insist, sure..."

"My," Mia said with a sweet smile, "what an absolute gentleman you are."

The smile didn't last.

Eeeek! No! No no no no! This is too high! This is much too high!

It took every ounce of Mia's restraint to stop herself from shouting those sentiments out loud. After Malong helped her onto the horse, she immediately noticed something was amiss: the back of a horse was much higher off the ground than she'd expected.

Worsening matters was the fact that she was in her school uniform. Conceptualized by those at the forefront of the fashion world, the uniforms of Saint-Noel Academy were rather avant-garde. A white blouse was worn under a blazer, which was further complemented by a pleated skirt with well-defined folds. It was nothing like the dresses traditionally worn by female nobility. It also meant she had to ride a horse in a skirt, which forced her to sit sideways with both legs together. For obvious reasons, this was terrifying. Had she been able to straddle the horse normally, she would have been looking forward over the top of the horse's head. With her body turned to one side, every downward glance was a stark reminder of her distance from the ground. It was also an extremely unsteady position; the slightest lapse in concentration would result in a swift and involuntary dismounting. As a result, there was a dramatic reallocation of mental resources. All her prior considerations — the romantic air, taking the lead, being the older and more mature one — were abandoned in favor of one singular goal: not having a nervous breakdown on the spot.

"All right, Princess Mia. Here, make sure you hold onto me tigh — Wah!"

Having lost all her composure, she wasn't even listening. The fear of falling caused her to wrap her arms around the nearest object — in this case, Abel's waist — and hold on for dear life.

"U-Um, Princess Mia, are you.. okay? Y-You don't have to hold on that tigh—"

"I-I-I know! I-I'm totally fine, s-so feel free to proceed!"

By the time the horse took its first step forward, both riders had completely lost their cool. Being in such close proximity to the girl he liked had turned Abel into a nervous wreck, while Mia was simply in a state of panic from sheer fear. Thus began their horseback date that was heart-stopping for all the wrong reasons.

Chapter 44: A Subtle Misunderstanding

Having prior experience in horseback riding, Abel was the first to regain his composure.

"Come on, Princess Mia, open your eyes and take a look around. The view from up here is quite something."

"I-I suppose I shall. All right... Here I go."

Mia took a deep breath, steeled her nerves, and forced her eyes open. The perspective felt completely new. Unlike the panoramic view from atop a castle, it was just a *little* higher than usual, which imparted a sense of novelty to the scenery. A cool breeze brushed past her cheeks and lifted her hair. The rhythmic sway of the horse's steps, which had been nothing short of terrifying at first, were also starting to grow on her.

How strange. For some reason, I'm starting to feel a little sleepy...

She gently rested her head against Abel's back and closed her eyes.

"Wh-Whoa, P-Princess? Wh-What are you— Oh, look over there! It's her! Your, uh, attendant!"

"Hm? My, you're right! Hey, Anne!"

Mia threw her hands in the air and waved enthusiastically at Anne. *Hands*. And waved them *enthusiastically*. Alas, familiarity breeds complacency, and complacency leads to carelessness.

"Wait, don't let go— No!"

"Eh?" Mia's view suddenly swiveled in an arc. "Hyaaaaaah!"

She screamed as she tumbled off the horse and landed on the ground with a heavy thud.

"Mmm.... Hm? How odd."

For some reason, the impact didn't feel as bad as it had sounded.

"Ow, ow, ow..."

She heard Abel's voice next to her ears. Apprehensively, she opened one eye for a peek.

“P-Prince Abel?! What are you...”

That was when she realized that she was in his arms. Rather, in his *embrace!* Abel had dove off with her to get his arms around her and break her fall!

“Wha— B-But— Huh?!”

Her voice cracked, and she stammered incoherently. She could hardly hear herself over the pounding of her own heart.

Wh-What in the moons am I getting so flustered for? This is just a hug. I’m simply being hugged by Prince Abel, that’s all. There’s no reason to get all worked up. Besides, this isn’t even the first time. I’m experienced in being hugged. I was hugged at the dance. I’m a master *of being hugged...* thought Mia to herself in a desperate attempt to calm the wild throbbing in her chest. *A-And, not to mention, Prince Abel is just a kid. That’s right. He’s eight years younger than me—*

“Are you okay, Princess Mia? Did you hurt anything?”

She glanced up to find him looking at her, expression full of concern. Their eyes met. The intensity of his gaze bore through her chest and pierced her heart.

N-No! Don’t look at me like that! Not with those eyes!

Mia quickly looked away, but not before her cheeks filled with color.

“I-I’m fine, Prince Abel. Quite fine, actually, so if you don’t mind... Could you, um, let me go?”

“U-Uh, right. Of course. My apologies.”

He hastily pulled away from her, his expression unmistakably crestfallen.

“Ah, please don’t get the wrong idea,” said Mia in a hurry. “I didn’t mind being held by you or anything. It’s not that.”

“Yes, of course. I know...”

Contrary to his words, Abel’s face did not brighten. He looked disappointed... almost desolate. Something about his expression made Mia feel uneasy.

Oh I see now. This is how the cookie crumbles, isn’t it? He stops liking me, and when I need reinforcements from him in the future, he won’t send them anymore...

There was just a shadow of a doubt in the back of her mind — a whisper asking if something like this could possibly cause him to despise her. She decided to dismiss the thought and focus on how to remedy the situation.

What can I do to... Ah-hah! I know!

She stepped closer to him and took his hands in hers.

“Huh? What?”

“Thank you very much for saving me earlier, Prince Abel!” she said before bringing her face right up against his. Then, she turned her head up and looked him right in the eye.

When someone gets too close, the natural reaction is to back away. I just have to make him experience that process for himself. My, how terribly clever I am!

“A-Ah, hey, um... Okay, I get it already, so could you just... not get so close?”

Unable to hold her gaze, he blushed and turned away.

“See? You looked away too, didn’t you? Would you care to explain why you did so, hm?”

Mia put on a victorious grin.

“Why...?”

“How you feel now, Prince Abel, is the same as how I felt earlier.”

“Wha—?!”

You see, as a person of very delicate sensibilities, I get nervous when people come too close. That’s all it is.

“B-But, I think... I probably feel that way more strongly than you do.”

“My, is that a sore loser I hear?”

There was an endearing, child-like quality to the way Abel got so competitive over something so trivial, and she couldn’t resist a giggle.

I do wonder if he’s trying to say he’s even more delicate than I am?

What Mia didn’t realize was that they had slightly different interpretations of how they felt. Whereas she assumed it was a reaction to “having someone get too close to you,” he took it to mean “being approached by the girl you like.”

What she also didn’t realize was that there was another layer to her own reaction that, unbeknownst to her, was rather similar to Abel’s.

Chapter 45: Princess Mia is No Loner

For the record, Mia was not a loner. As befitting her status as the Princess of Tearmoon, she was frequently surrounded by an entourage of other girls. Though their numbers had dwindled somewhat compared to the previous timeline — a result of Mia turning away anyone who ever said anything bad about Anne — they still represented the largest faction in her class.

Speaking of factions, it may be beneficial to describe the makeup of her class, in which Mia's group reigned supreme. Whether through clubs, kinship, or some other commonality, students would eventually form connections with one another. A sense of honest camaraderie or sometimes a mutual alignment of interests would cause these students to spend more and more time together, eventually separating the class into a number of cliques. Obviously, there would always be those who belonged to no group — those who failed to find their clique and would inevitably be given the label of "loner."

Mia's class had a girl like that. Her name was Chloe Forkroad. She was a timid girl whose defining features were her thick crop of black hair and even thicker glasses.

A bell rang, signaling the end of classes.

"Haaa..."

As the other students rejoiced at their liberation, Chloe let out a deep, weary sigh. She came from a family of merchants who ran a fairly large business. Her parents had gone from roaming with caravans to establishing a company, before further parlaying their accomplishments into a noble title. They were worldly merchants who knew their way around people. Their daughter, however, had a much more reserved personality. Given more to books than banter, she was always a shy girl, and their efforts to bring her along during their travels and have her meet all sorts of people only worsened her introversion. Fearing for her future, they decided to try sending her to the best academy on the continent, Saint-Noel. After an extensive campaign of gift-giving and string-pulling, they

succeeded in having her enrolled.

Once Chloe showed up at the academy, however, what awaited her there were the harsh realities of the nobility, and their obsession with lineage and tradition. As the newcomer whose family bought their title with money, she stuck out like a sore thumb. Thus began her lonely life at school.

For those who don't fit in, the worst time in class is during the breaks. Not a day went by when she didn't have to contend with the problem of how to spend these breaks — a time meant for socializing with friends — all by herself. To this end, the books she'd brought from home became her salvation. As concentrated vessels of knowledge, books sold well and fetched high prices on the market. Even Chloe's family, operating as Forkroad & Co., had always placed a particular focus on books as one of their primary products. Having grown up around them, she developed a love for books and brought many with her to the academy. However...

This is the last one... Spending every single break immersed in their pages had quickly exhausted her supply. *What am I going to do tomorrow?*

With only twenty pages left in her final book, no matter how slowly she read, she'd be done by tomorrow.

Maybe I should try talking to someone? As if. I can't work up the courage to do that. Even if I could, I should have done so when school first started. Now that everyone has already settled into groups, it's way too late...

She pressed her face flat onto her desk.

I wish I could just... disappear...

She wasn't sad. At least, she didn't think she was. Nevertheless, her eyes welled up with tears. That was when she heard a voice.

"Excuse me..."

Not realizing she was being spoken to, Chloe simply sighed and continued to press her face into her arms.

"Excuse me, do you have a moment?"

"...Huh?"

Chloe slowly looked up. As she blinked the tears from her eyes, the figure of a girl appeared.

"....Huh?!"

She froze with the kind of shock one experienced when the gloomy loner that nobody liked realized the coolest kid in class was speaking to her. The metaphor was apt, because this girl was the

undisputed star of their class and a veritable celebrity in her year. The Princess of the Tearmoon Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, was speaking to her.

"Um... Uh... Huh?"

Words failed her as she struggled to think through her confusion. Meanwhile, Mia's gaze fell on Chloe's book, open on the desk.

"What were you reading?"

"Oh, um, that? That's, uh... an illustrated guide to plants that grow in the desert... It tells you how they get their water... and stuff like that, and..."

To Chloe, this felt like the first real conversation she'd had since coming to the academy. In her thirst for interaction, she started to lean further and further forward, speaking with the frantic intensity of someone who was terrified of the slightest lull in their dialogue.

As Mia listened, a frown creased her brow.

"...Do you find that interesting?"

"Yes! Oh, um... Actually, it might not be too interesting to read. I mean, I think it's interesting, but... maybe not to other people, so..."

"Hmm... You seem to be reading books all the time, do you read any story books?"

"Oh, um, yes. I do. I like the one about, um... a love story between a prince from a small kingdom and a princess. But I, um... finished reading all the books I brought with me, so..."

And that was when, for some reason, a glint of excitement appeared in Mia's eyes, and she stared at Chloe like a hungry cat that had just spotted a mouse. The sight spooked Chloe a little, and she jerked back, only to find that her arm did not move with her. Her eyes drifted toward her shoulder, down to her wrist, over a pair of hands that were wrapped firmly around hers, and finally up to her captor's face.

Mia beamed.

"I've been looking for someone like you. Would you like to be my friend?"

Without a doubt, that was the last thing Chloe expected to hear.

Chapter 46: Book Buddies

Bingo! Oh ho ho, she's exactly the kind of person I thought she'd be.

Hearing Chloe talk filled Mia with a smug sense of satisfaction. When she'd approached the girl, considerations such as Chloe's isolation and Mia's own sympathy for the loneliness of her situation... had of course never even crossed Mia's mind. The only reason she took notice was because Chloe read through every single break, and Mia had reached the point where she wanted someone to talk with about the books she had been reading.

That's right, Mia craved a book buddy.

Earlier that day, Mia had been lying on her stomach in bed, reading the new draft that Anne's sister, Elise, had sent her.

Ah, it's so much fun to read it on proper paper like this!

The plot progression had yet to exceed Mia's knowledge, but the various details of how characters were portrayed and scenes depicted differed slightly from Anne's version, and there was a fresh sense of excitement in revisiting the story through this new lens. With her chin propped up on her palm and her feet kicking the bed behind her, she hummed happily to herself as she flipped through its pages, Anne watching over her nearby.

Though her behavior was hardly fitting for a princess, Anne did not frown nor protest. Mia's position subjected her to constant pressure to maintain a certain gravitas in her everyday mien. The only place where that burden was lifted was in her room, and Anne was committed to allowing her to lounge as freely as possible here. To Anne, this was all a part of taking care of Mia. To the rest of this world, this kind of treatment would be better described as "spoiling her."

Eventually, Mia flipped over the last page of the draft and let out a sigh of satisfaction.

"Thank you, Anne. As always, these are most enjoyable to read," she said as she gave the bundle of papers back. Then, she tilted her head as though suddenly remembering something. "By the

way, how are things back home for you? Is Elise doing well?"

For Mia, these drafts were a source of significant enjoyment that she always looked forward to. It was, therefore, imperative that Elise stayed in good health so she could continue writing the story.

"Thank you for your concern. Things are fine, and Elise is doing pretty well," replied Anne with a bright smile. There was no hint of deceit or hesitation on her face.

"I'm glad to hear that. If anything ever comes up though, make sure you let me know. Elise is one of my own, after all," she added, making sure to drive the point home. Then, she glanced at the draft and let out a sigh. "Still, it's such a terrible shame that you and I are the only ones reading this..."

The one thing that all book lovers have in common is their desire for post-book discussion. After reading something captivating, they simply *need* to talk about it with someone. Now, you might think Mia could just discuss the book with Anne, but unfortunately, she was surprisingly unreceptive to such talk. While she had read its contents in full, her motivation seemed to stem from an obligation to read her sister's work rather than any innate enjoyment.

Now that I really think about it, this story is pretty different from what I heard in the dungeon. I suspect Anne might actually be skimming through most of these.

The girls that comprised her entourage were also a poor choice. They'd simply shower it with praise. What they couldn't provide was the kind of meaty, explorative discussion about a work that Mia truly craved.

I wonder if there is anyone here who would be up to the task...

As she wandered around the classroom musing on this problem, her eyes settled on the girl who'd spent all her breaks absorbed in her books. She instantly knew she'd found the right person — the book lover Chloe.

She's willing to sacrifice time she could use to talk to her friends for reading instead. She must have such a deep love of books! All kinds of books!

...Of course, the main reason Chloe spent all her time reading was because she felt awkward just sitting there by herself doing nothing. She didn't actually love books as much as Mia thought.

"Would you like to be my friend?"

"...Huh?"

Chloe blinked. Then, she blinked some more. It didn't help. She still couldn't process what she'd just heard.

"U-Um... I-I'm... But, why?"

She couldn't fathom why Mia had asked that question. Asked *her*, of all people. It baffled her to no end. This was the Princess of Tearmoon. Her influence in class was unrivalled, and her social circle included all the serious heavyweights. From the princes of Sunkland and Remno, who were the objects of endless adoration from their female peers, to the Duke of Belluga's daughter, who literally governed their school, her friends were as elite as they came. This was someone who associated with the cream of the crop — those who sat at the very top of the Saint-Noel food chain.

So what was she doing talking to a bottomfeeder like Chloe? She had no reason to. Unless...

Then, something occurred to Chloe, and it all made sense. There actually was one possible reason: pity.

Did she see me by myself all the time and decide to take pity on me?

Knowing that Mia was sometimes referred to as the "Saint of the Empire," Chloe figured she must be a very compassionate person.

If she is, then... that's pretty depressing.

The thought made her feel miserable. There was nothing pleasant about being seen as pitiable. That must be why...

"Because you love books, and, as a matter of fact, there's something I'd like you to read."

Mia's answer confused her even more. She looked at the petite princess, her mouth agape and mind blank.

"So, if it's not too much trouble, would it be possible for us to be book buddies?"

It would be ten years later when Chloe would take over the family business and expand the book publishing department, eventually turning it into a massive publication company whose clients spanned multiple kingdoms. The books she had a hand in publishing would all eventually become bestsellers, and a particularly well-known bit of trivia was that the most popular among them was a book brought to her by her former classmate, the Princess of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon.

Chapter 47: Lunchbox Arrangements

"What? A swordsmanship tournament?" asked Mia as she was having lunch one day in the cafeteria with her usual group of girlfriends.

"Yes, the boys have been talking up a storm. The academy is apparently helping to host it, and it's taking place during the last week before summer vacation or something..." answered one of the girls.

"Haven't you heard?" asked another.

"Hm... I don't seem to remember ever hearing anything of the sort— Ugh, my head."

As soon as she tried to recall past memories of the event, she was struck with a terrible headache.

Swordsmanship tournament... Alone...

Words flashed ominously through her mind. Something about them made her feel like these were memories better left unearthed...

"Traditionally, if a girl has a boy she likes, she'll bring him a lunchbox that day, so we were wondering if Your Highness has already placed an order..."

...Lunchbox!

A scene from her memories burst vividly into her mind. It was from the previous timeline, and in it she was eagerly inspecting the extravagant lunchbox she'd ordered...

"Oh, I can see it now! I'm going to hand this to him, and he'll be so impressed that after he wins, he'll come tell me this lunchbox was the fuel for his victory!"

She had it all planned out and was raring to go. Her enthusiasm, however, was immediately doused with a bucket of cold water when Prince Sion adamantly refused to accept her lunchbox. Making things worse was the fact that she couldn't possibly confide in anyone about the rejection. In the end, she had no choice but to eat it herself. In her room. Alone. Sniffling to herself.

How awful that was...

A single tear fell from her eye.

"Wha— Y-Your Highness! What's wrong? Wh-Why are you crying all of a sudden?!"

"S-Someone! Bring a handkerchief!"

Seeing Mia shed a silent tear sent all the girls into a fit of panic.

"Oh, no, it's nothing." Mia wiped the tear away with her finger. "I'm glad you told me about it. Thank you," she said with a smile.

Unlike Prince Sion — who is an idiot *— Prince Abel is a perfect gentleman, so he'll eat my lunch. I know he will!* Things had changed since then, and so had she. This was not the Mia of old. *With that said, though, I should first make him promise me that he'll accept my lunch.*

Indeed, Mia Version 2.0 came with an important upgrade — the ability to plan ahead. She was now aware that people could have prior obligations and it was important to arrange things in advance. It was possible, for example, that he was going to prepare lunch himself that day, rendering Mia's efforts extraneous. That was why it was necessary to first communicate her intent to bring him a lunchbox.

I should go tell him as soon as possible!

After school, Mia went looking for Abel. The horsemanship club was meeting that day, so she went straight there and found him in no time.

"Prince Abel."

"Hey, Princess Mia. Here again? Looking to practice horse riding some more?" he asked as he looked her over. She was dressed in a sleek set of riding clothes made up of a vest and long pants. "Malong spoke very highly of you, you know? He said he'd thought you were just here on one of your princess-ly whims, but turns out you're taking practice very seriously."

Participation for club members was, in general, not mandatory. There was no need to come every day, and with nobles — who were used to going about their day however they wished — making up most of the student population, attendance was never high. The frequency with which Mia showed up was, if anything, an oddity. She came every day, but to be honest, she'd rather have spent the time lounging in her room. She was only there because she considered horsemanship an essential skill for making a quick

escape, so she had to learn it.

"Anyway, this is the only horse available right now. Would you like to ride it with me?" he asked, taking one glove off and offering her his hand.

"Really? I do think I'd like that..." Mia placed her hand in his. "My..."

"Hm? What's the matter?"

"Your palm..." she said as she ran her fingers along it, "has grown rather firm."

She gave him a winsome look.

"Uh, I guess. It's probably because, you know, there's a swordsmanship tournament coming up, and I've been practicing..."

"Mm. I see you've been working hard..."

It occurred to her that the skin on the palms of knights from back home were all similarly calloused. She regarded the boy standing before her again. Though his features were still those of a child, from a certain angle, there was something decidedly masculine about the way the shadows fell across his burgeoning jawline. It sent a small flutter through Mia's heart.

She hopped on the horse, behind Abel, made sure to wrap her arms firmly around him, then asked in a timid voice, "Um, Prince Abel, about the swordsmanship tournament..."

"Hm?"

"Have you... made any arrangements with anyone for lunch that day?"

"Uh, not especially..."

Upon hearing his answer, Mia felt a wave of relief.

"Perfect. In that case, would it be all right if I prepared a lunchbox for you that day?"

"Huh? For me?"

"Yes. I'll do my best to bring you something wonderful. I do hope it will help you win."

She had, unfortunately, neglected to consider one issue. This negligence was brought about by her relief. Feeling safe in the knowledge that she wouldn't suffer last-life's fate of a lonesome lunch, she let down her guard. Furthermore, her newly-acquired common sense was not substantial enough to alert her to this oncoming pitfall. For most people, the problem was obvious, requiring no more than a moment's thought. For Mia, it never even

crossed her mind.

Lunchboxes had to be ordered. And orders had to be placed in advance.

Blissfully ignorant of the fact that every store in town would be swamped with work on the day of the tournament and therefore stopped accepting orders a week in advance, Mia smiled happily to herself as she imagined a future that would never come to pass.

“Oh, how wonderful. I can hardly wait!”

Chapter 48: Anne's Ingenious Idea

"Wh-What in the moons is the meaning of this?"

By the time the matter came to light, there were only four days left until the swordsmanship tournament. After making her way to the best lunchbox store in town, Mia came face to face with the harsh reality of her situation.

"Sorry, but that day's a no go. Every store around here is already up to their eyes in orders. I doubt there's a place that can take another one."

She cursed her own carelessness. After hearing from her entourage that when it came to lunchboxes, "it's all about the personal touch," she decided to try ordering it herself without consulting Anne. She'd dealt with merchants when she was in Tearmoon, and she'd watched Ludwig place orders with suppliers before. Having seen it done, she figured it'd be a cinch to do herself. Her confidence, however, ultimately betrayed her.

Oh merciful moons, what should I do?!

Hearing that the stores had all stopped taking orders caused her to break out in a cold sweat.

M-Maybe if I pay them more... Yes, if I brought enough gold...

Throwing money at a problem was indeed the simplest solution. Show someone enough coins, and they could probably be convinced to prioritize her order. However...

No, I can't do that.

Mia immediately dismissed the thought. After dining together a few times, she'd come to understand that the academy's reigning authority, Rafina Belluga, was a scrupulous character.

She could, in theory, force a store to serve her through sheer might of money. While selfish, she might get away with it if the store staff simply worked longer hours. If the store ended up cancelling someone else's order to make room for hers, however... it would ruin Rafina's opinion of her. She could already see the contempt in Rafina's eyes as she vowed to never speak to her again.

"What... What a terrifying thought!"

In an attempt to avoid such a fate, she thought and thought, but no good ideas came. In the end...

"A-Anne!"

...She had no choice but to run back to her room and ask her loyal maid for help. Seeing her master burst through the door close to tears gave Anne quite the start.

"Milady, please calm down."

After being told of the situation, Anne immediately sprang to action.

Okay, first order of business should be to ask around in the market and get some more information...

While Mia was having fun at school, Anne had been steadily expanding their network of connections. She'd started with the academy staff. Through them, she got to know the merchants who did business with the academy. Next, she asked those merchants to introduce her to even more merchants. She paid frequent visits to the town, and the people in the market all knew her by name. By making use of her vast network of connections, she'd gotten a complete grasp of the situation.

"I see. This is indeed a tricky problem."

The kind of extravagantly-packed lunchbox Mia had in mind was very hard to find in stores around here to begin with. Lunchboxes were packed with the intention of being taken somewhere else and eaten. They were often necessary when traveling long distances, so they were usually comprised of foods that kept well. For the common populace, lunchboxes meant things like jerky and dried bread that traded in taste for resistance to spoilage. In fact, their contents didn't change much among noble circles either. Again, the primary concern was to make sure eating the food wouldn't cause the runs. Safety and nutrition were priorities. Taste was an afterthought. Consequently, the market simply didn't have products like "lunchboxes packed with delicious foods that would win the heart of the boy you liked." Such a demand was rare. Regular folks weren't going to pay money for things like that, and the academy's students didn't need them often either. Only a handful of stores actually prepared them, and by now, none of them were in any position to accept new orders.

"So basically, what we're missing is manpower." Anne let out a sigh of relief. At the very least, it wasn't the worst-case scenario. The thing she'd feared the most was a shortage of ingredients. If she

couldn't procure the physical ingredients with which to make the food, she might as well have called it a day right then and there.

"In that case..."

After making the rounds in the market and placing orders for ingredients, she returned to Mia.

"H-How did it go, Anne? Did you figure anything out?" asked Mia as she clung anxiously to Anne's arms.

"I think so," replied Anne with a nod. "Things might work out after all."

The concern on Mia's face gave way to relief.

"Oh, thank the moons! I knew I could count on you, Anne! I assume you found a store that would do it for us?"

"No, milady. None of them can."

Mia paled again.

"Th-Then what do we do?"

"We *make* it," said Anne as she turned to Mia with a look of determination. "We'll do it ourselves."

"...Huh?"

Mia's mouth hung open for a moment before Anne took her hands up in her own.

"Come on, I'll help you. We'll have you personally prepare a lunchbox for Prince Abel."

"P-Prepare it... myself?"

It goes without saying that Mia had never cooked in her life.

"Yes. You might not know, but among ordinary folks, people often get excited when a husband brings in an especially nice lunchbox his wife made him. It's like a show of love. Women's cooking, you see, is a source of happiness for men," said Anne, nodding to herself with the air of someone who'd just said something very wise.

"I-Is that how it works? I see... By the way, Anne, would you happen to be well-versed in the art of cooking?"

"...I've baked bread before."

The implication of those words was not lost on Mia. She could *smell* the impending danger.

Gaaah! We're doomed!

Chapter 49: Princess Mia... Hits Peak Mental Performance! (2)

After hearing Anne's answer and having all sorts of alarms go off in her head, Mia quickly went to seek help. Despite knowing plenty of people, few of them proved useful. After all, the girls who followed her around were all nobles and could probably count on one hand the total number of times they'd been in a kitchen. In fact, the same applied to essentially the whole of the Saint-Noel student body. Almost none of the students here had ever cooked before.

Almost none.

Mia made her way to the room of one of the exceptions — Chloe. Though the Forkroads were nobles, their title had been purchased. Even now, their lifestyle more resembled that of well-to-do merchants. There was a good chance she'd know how to cook.

"Oh, Princess Mia... Huh? Cooking?" Chloe tilted her head curiously at the unexpected request. "Well, yes, I'm familiar with the topic. I mean, I've read about it before," she said with a smile.

Note her choice of words: "familiar with the topic" and "read about it before."

It doesn't look like I'm going to have any luck with her either.

Mia's survival instincts were on point today, and they told her that Chloe's answer reeked of danger as well. Nevertheless, she decided to recruit her to the lunchbox team; beggars can't be choosers, after all.

"Sure, I'm free that day. I can come help."

After receiving a swift confirmation from Chloe, Mia headed out again. Knowing that she needed to scout more people, she made her way toward...

"...Nobody. Absolutely nobody else is coming to mind!"

Things had barely gotten started and she'd already run into a dead end. She was actually quite proud of herself for all the hard work she'd put into getting to know people, so this one hit her particularly hard.

The problem is the cooking! Finding someone in this academy who can cook is impossible to begin with!

Just as she was about to start heading back to her room to sulk for a while, Anne showed up.

"Milady! I found someone who can cook!"

"Really?! Wait, let me guess... someone you know who can cook..." After a moment's consideration, she said, "Oh, is it Liora?"

Tiona's attendant suddenly came to mind. She seemed like a possibility.

"Uh, no... I did try asking her, and I mean, she's good... but she's good at things like catching wild hares, gutting them on the spot, and roasting them whole..."

While it was technically a form of cooking, it seemed a tad too... "one with the wilderness," so to speak. For forest peoples, it was probably an extremely useful skill, but its relevance to preparing lunchboxes was debatable.

"It's actually Tiona who said she's good at cooking."

"T-Tiona?"

Mia recoiled in shock. And maybe horror as well. In Mia's world, Tiona was public enemy number one. She'd actively avoided her, trying everything she could to ensure they had minimal interaction with each other. Being put to the guillotine was, after all, the kind of thing that tended to leave a lasting impression. But...

"Yes. Apparently, she'd sometimes help out in the kitchen at home."

It made sense. The Rudolvons were so poor that it was almost silly to call them nobles. Not only that, but they had a ton of land that they used for farming. With most of their servants out working the fields, it was certainly possible that Tiona would have to help cook. She'd be a crucial addition to their team.

"Hnnngh... F-Fine," said Mia, making a face like she'd just swallowed the bitterest pill in history.

Thus, Mia paid a reluctant visit to Tiona.

"Ah, Princess Mia? What's the matter?" asked Tiona, caught off guard by the surprise visit.

"Miss Tiona, I heard that you are good at cooking. Is that true?"

"Yes, I'd say so."

Seeing Tiona's confident nod, Mia was about to let out a cry of glee...

"I'm always chopping things up, so if you need any vegetables

julienned, just leave it to me."

...Only to choke it back down after hearing Tiona's words.

"...And what about other things?"

"I can mince things too."

Mia knew nothing about cooking, but even so, she had a gut feeling that something wasn't right. Tiona didn't seem entirely reliable either. Still, questionable help was still help, and she needed all the help she could get.

"Miss Tiona, you see, I'm planning to prepare a lunchbox and deliver it to Prince Abel on the day of the swordsmanship tournament. Would you like to do so together?"

"Huh? Together? But... You're the princess, and I'm just... Besides, I don't have anyone to give it to..."

As soon as she heard those words, Mia had a flash of devious inspiration.

"My, is that so? Hm, in that case, how about that jer— Ahem. I mean, how about we prepare some extra and you can bring one to Prince Sion?"

It seemed to Mia that the chances of her ragtag group successfully preparing a lunchbox was rather low. If things went poorly, whatever concoction they managed to come up with might be so bad that it made Abel sick and ruin his performance at the tournament. In that case, however, so long as she made Sion eat the same thing...

That way, I'll at least take him down too! This is a perfect chance to get some payback!

She'd gone too far to stop now. Operation Lunchbox was going to happen one way or another. If she was destined to fail, then so be it. But she certainly wasn't going to fail alone. She was going to take her archnemesis down with her.

When life gives you lemons, squeeze their bitter juices into the eyes of your enemies! That's right! Mia knew how to make the best of what she had! She was an optimist! A positive thinker! That's what those words meant, right?

On top of that, it won't be just my fault. Tiona has to share the blame too. That means no matter how much Prince Sion hates us, he can't single just me out. Oh, what a perfect way to have my revenge!

An evil smile crept across Mia's lips. Little did she know that dragging in Sion would ultimately derail her entire scheme and send it off in a completely different direction.

Chapter 50: Keithwood Also Hits Peak Mental Performance!

Sion Sol Sunkland was practicing by himself in the training ground. Every swing of his sword was fast and smooth, bespeaking a true mastery of the weapon. His skill had reached such heights that he easily outclassed the adults. Even most soldiers were no match for him.

With a swift step forward, he unleashed a sideways swipe of his sword that was met with applause.

"Sun's barely up and already hard at work, milord?"

"Ah, Keithwood. You walk like a phantom as always. I didn't notice you at all."

Figuring it was a good time for a break, Sion put down his practice sword and pressed a towel to his brow. As he wiped off his face, he gave his head a quick shake. His smooth, silky hair threw up a few drops of sweat that glistened in the morning sun.

Keithwood watched for a while, idly observing that this was probably the kind of thing that made girls swoon, before asking, "So, have you decided whose lunchbox you're going to accept?"

"I don't plan to accept anyone's," said Sion, answering Keithwood's abrupt question with an equally abrupt response. He'd already been asked by a couple dozen girls, and he'd politely declined each and every one of their offers.

"Oh? Should I take that to mean you're secretly hoping I'll be the one to make you lunch?"

Sion grinned at Keithwood's jest.

"Hah. An interesting thought. In fact, I don't think I'd mind a taste of one of your culinary creations. When was the last time you cooked for me anyway? Must have been when we were still in Sunkland."

The elite education Sion had been receiving since childhood extended to every aspect of his life. Even the food he ate was strictly managed. Young Sion had been an obedient child, and he'd

always possessed wisdom beyond his years. Not once did he openly complain about the blandness of his meals. However, his close friend Keithwood often played therapist to his private grumblings. Keithwood would make nightly clandestine excursions to the kitchen, where he would prepare late night snacks and bring them back to his master. Sion fondly remembered how he'd subsequently ended up with a cavity that, after being discovered, led to both of them getting a good scolding.

"Funny you'd say that, because I seem to recall receiving a great deal of criticism about my cooking despite the many acts of *selfless philanthropy* I'd undertaken."

"But of course. I *am* the crown prince of a vast kingdom, after all. Your philanthropy does not exempt me from my duty to fuss excessively over how my food tastes," quipped Sion with a smirk.

"All right, all joking aside, I assume you've made arrangements for lunch to be delivered?"

Sion had no intention of accepting anyone's lunchbox. He couldn't — not as the Crown Prince of Sunkland. His title was a weighty one. Much too weighty. Any act of overt friendliness toward any particular individual...

...could end up harming the interests of our kingdom down the road. Yeah, I can totally see him thinking that. Keithwood let out a sigh and shrugged. *Not that he's wrong, but honestly, it wouldn't kill him to ease up a little.*

Crown prince or not, Sion was still a boy in his teens. There'd been a time when bland food had led him to whine. Now, he was missing out on the chance to personally receive a nice lunchbox. Who could say if he wasn't feeling a little sad on the inside?

"So, is there a reason why you're gazing so pensively at my face?" asked Sion.

Keithwood shrugged.

"Can't say, milord. I guess you just have a very thought-provoking face," he answered before sauntering away, leaving a perplexed Sion standing alone in the training ground.

"...Thing is, there are only so many people he can reasonably say 'yes' to," mused Keithwood as he considered Sion's potential lunchbox candidates. The first one to come to mind — and easily the most promising — was the Princess of Tearmoon, who was a match for Sion in both title and prestige.

“I get the feeling that if Princess Mia asked, Sion wouldn’t say no...”

Unfortunately, the princess, in all her wisdom, had apparently promised to take her lunchbox to Prince Abel. To this day, Keithwood couldn’t for the life of him figure out what it was about Abel that fascinated Mia so.

“Ah, Keithwood, good timing.”

Hearing someone call his name, Keithwood stopped and turned in the direction of the voice.

“Ah, if it isn’t Lady Rudolvon,” he said, politely greeting the daughter of Tearmoon’s Outland Count, Tiona Rudolvon. “How may I be of service on this fine day?”

“Well, you see...”

Tiona proceeded to explain their group effort to prepare lunchboxes. After she finished, he couldn’t help but feel a growing sense of awe as the implications of the plan dawned on him.

So, it’s the combined effort of three girls, among which one is a low-ranking noble and another is a merchant’s daughter-turned-noble. And also, there’s a second recipient, Sion wouldn’t be the sole focus of attention.

An arrangement like this was indeed rumor-proof. Nobody would go around gossiping about how they saw Sion getting close with any particular girl. Nevertheless, Mia would have successfully conveyed her desire to be friends.

Princess Mia, huh...

Keithwood nodded in admiration, feeling like he was witnessing a master plan being laid out before his very eyes. The layers upon layers of its intricate design came into view, and he could see its delicate thread of logic weaving deftly through the hazardous labyrinth that was the social landscape of Saint-Noel.

The Great Sage of the Empire indeed. I see you live up to your—

Then, all of a sudden, his thoughts were interrupted by a chill running up his spine. It might have been a hunch. Or perhaps a premonition. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but *something* didn’t feel right, as if a terrible misfortune was about to befall his master... Somehow, he suspected — no, he *knew,* with a certainty that surprised even himself — that if he allowed things to proceed as planned, something terrible would happen at the swordsmanship tournament.

He glanced at Tiona. There seemed to be no malice in her

innocent smile. Nevertheless...

Might as well go take a look. Prudence is the better part of valor, after all. Can't hurt to make sure.

And so, sensing that the health of his dear master was in dire straits, Keithwood volunteered to join Mia's cooking squad. Though none of those involved would ever come to know, it was nevertheless true that Keithwood's decision on this day would prove critical in safeguarding the gastrointestinal soundness of both Sion and Abel.

Chapter 51: Keithwood's Culinary Class

Three days before the swordsmanship tournament, Mia and the girls were in the kitchen doing a rehearsal lunchbox preparation. Keithwood made his way there with the intention of inspecting their progress. When he arrived and witnessed their creations...

He almost had a heart attack.

"Your Highness, what is... Is this going to be made into bread?" he asked, staring at the mound of dough that Mia was beating at. She gave her sculpture a few more smacks before turning to him with a satisfied smile.

"Yes. Prince Abel loves horses enough to have joined the horsemanship club, so I'm sure he'd appreciate something like this," she said with a confident smile.

Hands on her hips and flour on her face, Mia proudly displayed her work to him.

"I see. It's true that the first step of cooking is to consider who you're cooking for. In that sense, you've done well." Keithwood nodded with feigned approval. "However, Your Highness, there is a fatal flaw to this creation. Miss Anne," he said, passing the torch. "Care to elaborate?"

She looked back at him and gave him a confident nod that seemed to say, "Leave it to me." He stepped back and gestured for her to continue. Being the resident baking expert, surely she knew exactly what was wrong with Mia's dough.

"Right. You see, Milady Mia, if you want it to look like a horse, the ear here has to be a little more—"

"Okay, no, eyes back here please," said Keithwood, picking the proverbial torch back up from where Anne had dropped it. "The problem with this dough is that it's too thick. You can't heat it all the way through. Also," he said, walking over to the massive piece of dough. The top of it reached his chest. "The damn thing is the size of an actual horse! You'd have to light a shed on fire in order to

bake it!" He brought his fist down on the life-sized dough sculpture and it collapsed. Then, ignoring the shriek of grief that escaped Mia, he ripped it into little bits and threw the pieces on the table. "They need to be smaller and thinner! Like these! Do you understand, Your Highness?"

"..."

Mia gave him an angry pufferfish scowl.

"Do—You—Understand?!"

After a pause, Mia sighed.

"...Fine, we'll do it your way, then."

She shrugged and shook her head as though acquiescing to a particularly demanding child. A vein bulged in Keithwood's temple. He resisted the urge to scream.

"Keithwood, how are these vegetables I'm working on?"

"Ah, Lady Rudolvon..." he said, turning to Tiona with as friendly a smile as he could muster. The smile froze on his face. His cheek began to twitch. "I... I see you're quite good at chopping up vegetables." He looked at the plate of vegetables, all neatly cut into strips. Then, he looked at the next plate. And the next. And the next. "I do believe, however... that milord and Prince Abel are not herbivores, and thus, will not be able to consume such huge amounts of vegetables."

Four plates?! Four freaking plates?! What is this? Are we building a house out of vegetables?

Out of propriety, he kept his thoughts to himself. It wasn't easy, but once again, he resisted the urge to scream. This day had turned into the ultimate test of his patience.

"Hm? Wait... what's that smell?"

"I... Roasted... The Meat."

The back door of the kitchen swung open, and Liora came in.

"Ah... Well, that's certainly some well-roasted chicken there, Miss Liora."

The meat was still sizzling, and juices dripped from the browned skin. A few places were a tad singed, but it did look rather appetizing.

"Now, if only you had considered the circumstances under which this meat will be served..."

Why?! Why would you not use the oven! There's one in the kitchen, for heaven's sake! It's right there! *Why did you have to go start a freaking fire in the courtyard and roast it on a spit?!*

Not only was it a rather crude method of meat preparation, it was also questionable from a hygienic standpoint, not to mention awkward to use. Just as he was about to voice his concerns, however, someone else beat him to the punch.

"He's right, Liora. You do realize we're going to be serving these to princes, right?" said Chloe, who held a thick cookbook in one hand.

Oh thank the sun, at least the Forkroads' daughter has some common sense...

"Taste is best preserved when ingredients are served raw, so—"

"No! No raw meat!" snapped Keithwood, trying to prevent another crazy idea from taking root. Only then did it occur to him to glance at the book in Chloe's hand. The title read, *"Exotic Recipes for Exotic Delicacies."*

"Huh? But it said in the book that raw horse liver tastes really good. And considering Prince Abel is in the horsemanship club, I figured a recipe that used horse would be a good match..."

"Okay, look, the only time you should eat any sort of raw organ is when you're in a restaurant that specializes in it. Also, what is it with you people and putting horses into your food? It's the horsemanship club! They *ride* horses! Not eat them! First, Her Highness tries to make life-sized horse bread, and then you try to serve them raw horse. What is this? Are we trying to pick a fight with them or something?"

It had — far too late, but nevertheless — occurred to Keithwood that the most dangerous people in the kitchen weren't beginner cooks who knew nothing; it was beginner cooks who knew something but had no idea how any of it fit together.

Sweet sun high above, what have I gotten myself into?

Realizing that drastic measures were necessary, he immediately sprang to action.

“My dear princess and ladies, I need you to listen to what I’m about to say very carefully.” He paused, allowing the silence to impart a certain gravitas to his next words, which he spoke in a soft but solemn voice. “On the day when we make the lunchboxes, you’re all gonna f— follow my orders please.”

He let slip a bit of his true feelings, but he didn’t really care at the moment.

“No complicated recipes. We’re going to keep things simple and just make sandwiches. Do you understand?”

“Aww, but then it’s not special eno—”

“Do—You—Understand?!”

His patience failed him, and he slammed a hand onto the table as he gave them all the death stare.

“Eeeek! Y-Yes I do!”

He turned away with a grimace, partly because he somewhat regretted his outburst, but mostly because he realized he’d just jumped onto a burning ship with port nowhere in sight.

Chapter 52: Princess Mia… Feels Her Heart Flutter!

Two days before the swordsmanship tournament, Mia paid Abel a visit to explain her plans to him. She caught him just as he was about to head to the lakeshore for some sword practice, so they decided to head there together.

"I see. Homemade lunchboxes, huh…" he said as they walked.

Lunchboxes like these would normally be ordered from a specialty store. Mia, however, was offering to personally make them with her friends, none of whom had any experience. This should have been a pretty scary proposition. However…

I think my cooking might actually be pretty good.

…Mia was harboring the kinds of delusions that would cause Keithwood to pop a blood vessel. Nevertheless, she at least had enough sense to know that her cooking stood no chance against the work of professionals in a store. Therefore, figuring some preemptive damage control would do her well if things went awry, she came to lower Abel's expectations.

"I'm terribly sorry, Prince Abel. I know that, normally, I should be ordering it from a store of the highest quality…"

In other words, *don't get too upset if it doesn't taste so great.*

"It's fine. I don't mind. I'm actually sort of glad, to be honest."

"Glad? Why?"

"It reminds me of the lunches that Mother would make for me from time to time."

The social standing of women — whether noble-born or common — in the Kingdom of Remno was rather low. This did, however, mean that they had more in common with regular people, often doing the same menial tasks performed by servants in other countries. Unlike in other kingdoms, it wasn't rare for noble women in Remno to cook for their husband and children.

"While they might not have been as flavorful as the meals prepared by the head chef, my mother and sisters put their hearts

into making them, and that alone made them special."

Then, he turned to Mia and, with a gentle smile, told her that he was looking forward to her lunch. This caught her off guard, and she realized that the bar for the quality of her lunchbox had just been raised.

Uh oh, I never knew Prince Abel had been eating homemade lunches all the time! Now I can't tell him that mine might not taste good because it's homemade... Hm, this calls for a change of plans. Maybe I should make something more complicated...

Before Mia had time to fully work out what was definitely a very bad idea, the shoreline came into view.

"Wow..."

The lake stretched out before her eyes against a background of unbroken blue. Sunlight, like golden glitters, danced across its unblemished surface while gentle waves brushed rhythmically against the beautiful white sand. There was almost no one else there. It was pristine, quiet, and utterly breathtaking.

"I had no idea such a wonderful place existed..."

Even in the previous timeline, she'd never been here before.

"I'm glad you like it. It's a good place," said Abel. Then, in one smooth motion, he stepped down onto the beach, swung around, and offered her his hand. "Here. Watch your step."

The gesture was courteous and elegant, and the way he did it felt so natural. In that moment, he seemed like the perfect gentleman, and Mia felt the slightest flutter in her heart.

R-Relax. This is nothing special. It's what's expected of boys.

She took his hand. There was a rugged firmness to his palm that surprised her. Again, her heart fluttered.

Ahh, to think that I'd have the chance to walk along such a beautiful lakeshore with a gentleman at my side...

Back when she was in the dungeon, she never imagined such a thing would ever be possible. And now, it was more than possible; it was happening. She was living it. A profound sense of bliss welled up inside her. Slowly, she drew a deep breath and looked around, trying to take in all the sights, sounds, and smells of this idyllic moment.

"There is one thing though, that I find to be a shame..." said Abel in a soft voice.

Mia turned to him with a quizzical look.

"Hm? What might that be?"

“The fact that I can’t be the only one getting a lunchbox from you...” he said with a playful grin.

His sudden confession sent her heart wildly aflutter.

Wh-Wh-What is the matter with him?! You can’t just say that! You...You just can’t!

In the suffocating darkness of those moonless nights when the loneliness in the dungeon was almost palpable, she’d forced her mind away from the coldness of the floor and the hunger in her stomach, imagining time and again that she was somewhere else. She’d dream up scenes of herself enjoying a stroll along the shoreline with the man of her dreams... and indulge in fleeting visions of their sweet nothings...

And now she was smack dab in the middle of one! She was *not* ready for this.

I-I need to calm down! Okay, deep breath. Deep... Breath... Deep. Breath. Deep breath deep breath deep breath...

Her flustered mind failed to follow even its own instructions, and her breaths turned into panicked gasps for air. Abel stopped and looked at her reddened face with concern, which only made it redder.

“Hm? Are you okay? You seem a little tired.”

“What? Oh. I, uh, maybe. Maybe I am.”

Abel took her to a part of the beach where some trees provided shade. Then he promptly took off his coat and laid it down on the sand.

“Here, sit down and rest for a while. You can watch, but it’s going to be pretty boring. Once you feel better, feel free to head back.”

After helping Mia to the ground, he began to methodically practice his sword swings.

“My, how diligent of you. You’re really taking this very seriously, aren’t you?”

She recalled the firmness of his palm. It was a testament to the amount of time he spent practicing with the sword.

“Haha, more desperate than serious, I’d say. I think I’ve spent more time with swords in the past month than I have in my entire life. After all, now there’s someone I want to fight... and I’m willing to do whatever it takes to win.” He paused, as if remembering something. Then he said, “Which reminds me, about the lunchbox... you know how I said it was a shame? In a way, I’m glad about it

too.”

“...Huh?”

“This way, it’s fair and square. Otherwise, when I beat Prince Sion, people might say it’s only because he didn’t get to eat your homemade lunch.”

With that, he returned to his practice, but not before showing her a bright smile full of confidence and resolve. It left Mia dazzled, and a long time passed before the burning sensation in her lungs reminded her to take a breath.

Chapter 53: Behold! The Horse-Shaped Sandwich!

On the morning of the swordsmanship tournament, under the supervision of Keithwood, executive director, the sandwich squad got to work.

"All right. Miss Liora, like we discussed, you're going to take that chicken and roast it in the oven over there. I know it's a little different than you're used to, but it should actually be easier to control the heat this way."

"Okay... I understand."

Liora straightened her back and saluted before making her way to the chicken. She plucked out all its feathers, gutted it, seasoned it with salt and spices, filled the inside with herbs, and then... tossed it in the oven. It landed with a rather disturbing splat, which Keithwood decided that he definitely hadn't heard. He was pretty sure that if he let every little problem get to him, he'd lose his mind before the day was out.

"As long as it's cooked... it's edible... as long as it's cooked..." he muttered to himself, reciting the words like some sort of incantation as he moved on to the next station.

"Meat doesn't have to look good, anyway. It'll be fine. Now, next is..."

"Keithwood, how do these look?" asked Tiona as she walked up to him carrying her work in her slender arms.

He looked over and gave a satisfied nod.

"Looks good. I see the good lady of the Rudolvons is as adroit as ever," he said, causing Tiona to blush a little.

Ever since their practice session, he'd known that so long as Tiona had a correct sense of quantity and scale, she'd be a useful addition to the team. She should be fine. The problematic one was...

"May I start baking this as well?" asked Mia as she held out her work.

Keithwood took one glance and immediately felt a headache

coming on. The only saving grace was that Anne had probably handled the actual kneading. Judging from how it looked, it... probably would function as dough. Now if only it would function as a *sandwich*. He stared at it — at the head, the ears, and the four legs — and felt the pounding in his head grow stronger. Just like last time, the dough Mia prepared was shaped like a horse. Horse-shaped bread did not a sandwich make.

I told you to make it a goddamn square...

Admittedly, he saw signs of improvement. It was now flat and thin enough to be heated all the way through. Its size was also arguably within the limits of what could be considered reasonable. The fact that it was shaped like a horse, however, was definitely a problem. Furthermore, in what must have been a misguided attempt to pursue fidelity, the body of the horse-dough was of realistic proportions, making it very narrow.

This is supposed to be a sandwich*, damn it! How do you intend to* sandwich *anything when it's shaped like this?!*

He felt a strong urge to slam his fist into the thing and beat it back into a pulp, but a glance at Mia stayed his hand. Not only would such an act be extremely inadvisable from a foreign relations standpoint, he could tell from the expectant look in her eyes as she awaited his appraisal that she'd put her heart into making the thing. Squishing it would be unnecessarily cruel. At the same time, it wouldn't hold its contents properly, making it impossible to use as is. With its awkward shape, it was a disaster waiting to happen. He could already imagine how everything would burst out the second somebody took a bite.

Solutions, Keithwood. Focus on solutions... All right.

"Excuse me, Lady Forkroad, but could you and Miss Anne go make some white sauce? As for ingredients..."

"Oh, don't worry, I know what to use. I've read about it before. Miss Anne, I'll list the ingredients off for you. Could you grab these..."

Under Chloe's instruction, Anne quickly gathered the necessary ingredients. This was no surprise, as the breadth of Chloe's knowledge easily rivaled that of even Keithwood. So long as she knew the correct knowledge to draw from — that is, *not* the ones that involved raw meat and exotic cuisine — she'd be an invaluable member of their team.

All right. We'll use the sauce as glue.

The biggest problem with Mia's bread was that all the meat and vegetables were going to fall out. To remedy this issue, Keithwood was going to keep everything stuck together using sauce.

After the horse-dough became horse-bread, he took a piece, covered one side in sauce, placed a layer of vegetables on it, covered those in another layer of sauce, added the meat on top, and topped it off with another slice of bread.

"Okay. Done..."

...It was complete.

Behold the fruit of Keithwood's painstaking labor — the horse-shaped sandwich!

After they'd finished making everything, Mia walked over to Keithwood.

"Please accept my thanks, Keithwood. Your help has been greatly appreciated."

Keithwood lowered his head in a polite bow.

"It is my honor to have been of service. I shall duly relay your thanks to His Highness," he replied by rote. The servant's deed was the master's credit. Praise for the attendant was meant for the lord. Such was the way of things, and Keithwood naturally assumed Mia's words were meant for Sion. To his surprise, though...

"No, I am not thanking Prince Sion. I am thanking *you*, Keithwood," she said as she looked him in the eye. "*You* were the one who helped us, and it was because of you that we were able to make these lunchboxes." She beamed at him with earnest gratitude.

Ahh... I see now. So this is how she does it... How she touches people's hearts... he thought, feeling something stir in his chest.

Normally, nobles never deigned to thank attendants. The expression of gratitude was an act of lowering oneself, and the pride of nobles would never allow them to place themselves beneath lowly servants in any sense. Mia, however, flouted such pointless customs. She voiced her thanks and did so earnestly. For Keithwood, who'd been steeped in the sweltering mires of noble culture for most of his life, Mia's words came like a breath of fresh winter air — shockingly new and sharply stimulating.

Gotta admit, if I'd run into this girl before I met Sion... I might be calling her milady.

It was probably for the best that he was blissfully ignorant of the thoughts going through Mia's head.

Hmph! As if I'd ever thank that jerk!

Indeed, Keithwood had no idea how petty Mia's reasoning was. Of course, in the previous timeline, Keithwood had been responsible for a good amount of her suffering as well, but that was irrelevant to her. After all...

The attendant's wrong is the master's fault! It's all Sion! He's the one to blame!

Never would Keithwood imagine that, in fact, Mia observed those pointless customs of nobility faithfully.

Chapter 54: The Swordsmanship Tournament: Abel's Battle

Saint-Noel Academy hosted a biannual swordsmanship tournament that took place in the summer and winter. In general, all male students were obligated to participate, making the tournaments very popular events that were widely attended.

"Milady, look! There are so many people here!"

"Yes. It looks as if the whole town's here."

Erected within the vast expanse of the school grounds were three special arenas, each of which was surrounded by a ring of street stalls. Being a school for nobility, Saint-Noel was generally off-limits to commoners. This day, however, was an exception, during which people from all walks of life were allowed entrance into the school grounds. Though merchants were subject to Rafina's strict inspection, once they were cleared, they were free to enter and set up shop wherever they wished. With a myriad of colorful signboards adorning the grounds, the whole school was turned into a festival for the day.

That reminds me... I remember doing this in the previous timeline, walking around and looking at all the stalls... by myself.

Previously, Mia had intended to tour the stalls with Sion. It had never even crossed her mind that she might be turned down, so she'd told all the girls in her group beforehand that she'd be unavailable that day. Consequently, not only did no one accept her lunchbox, but no one accompanied her to the tournament. In the end, she opened the lunchbox by herself, ate the food alone, and spent the rest of the day wandering through the stalls alone.

How awful that was...

She was so upset that she couldn't even bear the sight of her friends having fun, and she spent the day scowling and glaring at everyone, which started a rumor about how Princess Mia hated the swordsmanship tournament. As a result, no one dared to accompany her for any subsequent tournament.

“Look, milady! That looks so tasty!”

“It certainly does, Anne. Could I ask you to go purchase some? Oh, make it three portions, please. One for you, one for me, and one for Chloe.”

“Got it!”

Anne dashed off. Soon after, she returned with the food in a small paper box. A cheap, sugary smell emanated from it. On the top of the pile of food were a few strips of something red. Mia picked up a piece with her fingers and popped it into her mouth. The instant it touched her tongue, she felt the back of her nose grow hot. A second later, she felt a tear flow down her cheek...

Ahh... I see... So this is what it feels like to be moved to tears...

She thought of Anne and Chloe... and how wonderful it was to be able to tour the stalls with two actual friends.

I must be so happy right now... These must be... tears of bliss...

“Princess Mia! That! That!”

Chloe was wildly flailing her arms in the air.

“Eh?”

“That’s a crimson pepper! It’s really spicy! Spit it out! Quickly!”

“Huh? A-A-Ahhh, it’s spicy! It’s so spicy! Ahh, my nose is on fire!”

The harsh sting of the crimson pepper caused her eyes to well up with tears and her nose to turn red.

“W-Water... Someone... Bring water...”

“Here, drink this.”

Someone held a bottle out to her. She immediately took it and gulped the contents down. A refreshing citrus taste filled her mouth, and the pungent flavor of crimson pepper faded.

“Phew... I’m fine now. Thank you very much,” she said as she rubbed the tears from her eyes and looked up at her savior.

“You’re very welcome. Glad to have been of help.”

“P-Prince Abel!”

Before her stood Abel, now donning knight-style armor. Though it was designed for mock battles, with leather guards for the chest and elbows, he still cut a fine figure in what was undoubtedly fighting garb. Faced with the prince’s striking new image, Mia couldn’t help but...

No, heart, no! No fluttering! I’m better than this!

...Try her absolute hardest to stop herself from swooning.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Was this something you were going to drink

during the tournament?" asked Mia as she looked at the bottle she'd just drank from. "I'll go buy another one for you."

"It's fine. There's still half of it left, anyway," replied Abel as he took the bottle back. Mia watched as he fastened it back onto his waist.

M-My, does he intend to drink from that bottle? But... I just drank from it. If I touched my mouth to it, and then he drinks from it... then... then—

As she worked through the implications of this situation, the final step in her logic led her to something that overwhelmed her sensibilities, and her mind went blank for a while. Abel, for his part, didn't seem to mind. He was a twelve-year-old boy with a very limited understanding of the dynamics of relationships. Plus, he had a tournament to focus on, which occupied enough of his mind to keep him from obsessing over the appropriateness of bottle sharing.

I-Isn't this... an indirect kiss?!

Meanwhile, Mia was having a minor meltdown.

"Is something wrong, Princess Mia? You don't look so good..."

"I-I'm perfectly fine!" she said with a start, only to find Abel looking intently at her, his face mere inches from hers.

"...Nngh!"

Mia gulped.

"Are you sure? You look like you have a fever."

"I-I-I have no fever, I'm totally fine! S-Speaking of which, uh... Prince Abel, who is your first opponent?" Mia asked in a hasty attempt to change the topic.

Before he could answer, a third voice cut him off.

"Well well well, what do we have here? If it isn't Her Highness Mia."

A young man waded into their conversation. He was no stranger; Mia had confronted him before, during which she'd delivered the verbal equivalent of a slap to the face.

"You're... Prince Abel's brother, I believe?"

"Hah, what an honor to be remembered by Your Highness," said the First Prince of the Kingdom of Remno. He made an exaggerated bow before continuing. "By the way, I've heard by way of rumor that you've prepared a lunchbox for my dear little brother."

"I have indeed, and it has been made with the utmost care," declared Mia proudly, only to be met with the First Prince's

mocking laughter.

"Heh heh heh. Has it now? Well, that's... Hm, how should I put this... terribly unfortunate."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Heh. What I mean... is that Abel's first opponent will be me. In other words, he's going to lose his first match. Which is perfect, because then he'll get to eat your lunch. Nothing like a good loss before a meal, right? Really makes the food go down, tears are such great seasoning," he said with a toothy sneer. "I must admit though, I didn't expect you to actually fall for my little brother. Looks like the famed Great Sage of the Empire is still just a little kid. Got no taste in men."

"Excuse me," Abel interjected as he hastily stepped between them. "My dear brother, please stop being so rude to Princess Mia."

Abel knew that his older brother was judging Mia based on Remno's views toward women. That was a mistake. While Mia had — in his mind, at least — no shortage of tolerance or benevolence, that didn't mean she was a pushover. She was — again, in his opinion — a veritable saint who boldly stood up to injustice. Daring, proud, and profoundly wise — descriptors only valid in his fantasy world, of course — she was not the kind of girl who would take an insult lying down. Figuring that his brother's insolence must have roused Mia's ire, he looked anxiously in her direction. To his surprise, she didn't say a word. Instead she quietly stepped back and retreated behind him.

Princess Mia... But, why?

At first, Abel was bewildered that Mia had backed out of the confrontation. Then, he realized her true intention.

Is it because... she wants me to step up?

Had she wished, Mia could easily have stood her ground. With her wits, his brother would be no match for her in a duel of words. She did none of that. Instead, she chose to say only one thing.

"I await your victory, Prince Abel."

Her expression was perfectly placid.

My... victory? She believes I'll win?

It was true that claiming victory against his brother would now simultaneously defend Mia's honor. However...

Abel regarded his brother, the brother he'd never won a single match against, who was so much more skilled with the sword than he, and who stood a full head taller.

Will I? ...Can I?

Something dark and heavy began to creep into his heart. He knew this feeling. It was despair, and just as his whole world began to dim...

"I prefer winning before a meal. The food tastes better that way."

The warmth of her voice washed away the encroaching darkness and soothed his anxious heart.

"Y-Yes, of course..." He broke into a smile. "I do too."

"You're... Prince Abel's brother, I believe?"

Mia frowned. She couldn't seem to remember the young man's name. As she struggled to think of it, the nameless prince launched into a derisive tirade that she only vaguely paid attention to. Eventually, she sighed and gave up trying to recall his name.

I see he holds me in rather a great deal of contempt, she thought as she idly regarded the menacing smile on his face. *Well, this is going to be a little tricky.*

Mia didn't actually think badly of Abel's brother. She... didn't think anything of him at all, in fact. She'd completely forgotten he existed until this very moment. At the time, she'd been so focused on trying to get away from Sion, and acquainted with Abel, that she'd paid no attention to anyone else. Afterwards, she'd still had no particular interest in Abel's brother, and his appearance had quickly faded from her memory.

Nevertheless, her current situation required some tact. Interesting or not, he was still the First Prince of Remno, and souring relations with him would do her no good. After all, the whole point of getting close to Abel had been so she could ask Remno for reinforcements when things went south. All that effort would go to waste if the First Prince ended up vetoing her request. She didn't need him to *like* her, but she didn't want him to hate her with a burning passion either.

Which means it's important not to display any overt hostility!

To that end, she decided to take a step back and divert his animosity elsewhere. Mia's goal was simple: don't get guillotined. Avoiding the guillotine was always on her mind, and this desire fueled all her actions.

Now, Prince Abel just has to lose and his brother will feel nice and proud of himself... Then, I'll comfort Prince Abel after his loss and get

on even friendlier terms with him. Why, this is killing two birds with one stone.

After some meticulous calculating, she looked to Abel...

"I await your victory, Prince Abel."

...And let slip her true thoughts. She'd meant to say something else, but suddenly, she recalled the calloused skin of his palms. She remembered the hours he spent practicing with the sword. She knew how hard he'd worked. In that instant, the thought of him losing... felt strangely upsetting.

My, how odd. Why do I feel this way?

Puzzled by her own words, she took a moment to ponder this. Eventually, she arrived at a conclusion.

Ah, I see. It's because I worked so hard to make those sandwiches, and it'd be a shame if he felt so sad after losing that he couldn't appreciate how delicious they are...

She nodded to herself, confident in the accuracy of her own analysis.

"I prefer winning before a meal. The food tastes better that way."

"Now, let us begin the seventh match of the qualifiers! Abel Remno, Gain Remno, please step into the arena."

Hearing his name called by the referee, Abel took a quick breath and quietly walked up the steps to the arena. After reaching the center, he drew his weapon and waited. Beyond the dulled edge of his training sword stood his brother — a perpetual symbol of his defeat. Nerves sent painful spasms through his gut.

But... I can't afford to lose.

He tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword and glared at his brother.

"All right, my dear brother. Let me test how much you've improved."

Gain hoisted his sword over his shoulder and smirked. Abel blinked. Suddenly, Gain had closed the distance and his sword swung toward him.

"Ugh..."

Abel met the heavy slash with his own sword; the blades slammed into each other with a grating screech. A jolt ran through his arms, leaving them numb, and he almost dropped his sword. While the weapons had been dulled, that didn't make the hard

metal any lighter. They might not cut, but they could certainly bruise. And they could definitely break bones. A memory flashed by, of the last time he suffered a fracture at the hands of his brother. He remembered the pain, and his whole body tensed.

"Hmph. Is that it? I figured as much."

Gain shot him a look of disdain. He clenched his teeth.

Damn it, he's so strong.

Boys in their early teens grew quickly, becoming bigger and stronger every year. Being older, Gain's advantage in sheer strength was considerable, and his powerful strikes left Abel with no choice but to spend all his time defending himself.

"I have to say," said Gain in a mocking tone, "you sure found a nice girl for yourself, Abel."

"What?"

They clashed again, locking blades. Gain leaned in, bringing his face close.

"I didn't think a wimp like you could woo the Empire's princess. I'm sure Father will be glad to hear the news."

The older brother cackled loudly before looking past Abel to the stands, where Mia was watching.

"That reminds me. Your girl sure had a lot less spunk in her today. What happened to being *the Great Sage of the Empire*, huh? She's just a kid after all. I figured if I scare her a little, she'll start behaving, and look at her now. Nice and quiet."

"That's—"

Gain continued before Abel could refute him.

"If the two of you get married, then bring her back to Remno. Give me a week, and I'll teach her how to behave."

Visions flashed before Abel's eyes. He saw his mother, his sister, and the castle maids.

"I might have to get a little rough with her, but don't worry. A little bit of pain goes a long way. They learn faster that way. And you'll be better off in the long run. Then, we'll have the Empire at our mercy..."

Dark memories resurfaced in Abel's mind. Scenes of harassment, of abuse, sometimes of violence... The figures of the women in his life — their eyes dim and downcast — faded in and out of the scenes, and for a moment, he saw Mia there, her eyes as sad as theirs...

His heart, which had been pounding furiously, began to slow.

His vision cleared, and he felt like he could see afresh. A strike from his brother's sword would hurt, even wound him, but that no longer mattered. Nothing could compare to the one thing he now knew was more important than all else.

"Gain," he heard himself saying. His voice was cold — far colder than even he'd expected.

"...What?" His brother noticed his change in tone as well.

Abel lowered his sword and stepped back.

"You can call me whatever you want. Mock me. Insult me. I don't care. But," Abel stared at his brother with a piercing gaze, "if you say one more bad word about Princess Mia..."

He thought of the girl known as "the Great Sage of the Empire." He thought of the light she'd brought to his world. For her to be robbed of that radiant aura...

Was absolutely unacceptable.

"So what? What are you going to do?"

Gain swung his sword tauntingly with one hand, the degree of mockery in his attitude almost farcical. Abel calmly observed his brother as he held his sword with both hands and raised it high above his head. It was the first stance from the sword fighting style passed down through the Remno royal family. There would only be one strike, in which the user would put everything they had into that single downward swing. The goal was simple — swing harder. Swing faster. Hit them before they hit you. That was it. There was no need for defence. That one attack would decide it all.

Seeing Abel's stance, Gain roared in laughter. In a way, his mockery was understandable, because it was the most basic of stances — the first thing every beginner swordsman learned in their fundamental routine.

"The first stance? Are you kidding me? But then again, I guess it suits a loser like you."

Abel kept his eyes fixed on his brother. He watched him confidently lower himself into a stance. He watched him hold up his sword. He watched the brother he'd never once defeated position himself to receive his final strike. Then, he exhaled.

Now!

He stomped the ground and rushed forward.

"I won't allow you to insult her any further!"

He yelled these words as loudly as he could. At the same time, he swung his sword with all his strength. The blade caught the sun

and burst into a blinding bolt of light.

In the span of a heartbeat, the match ended.

"Hnnggh... Gyaaaaaaah!"

Gain let out an embarrassingly loud screech of pain. His sword landed on the ground with a heavy thud. Embedded in his shoulder was the dull metal of Abel's blade.

"And that's the match!" shouted the referee.

Deafening cheers shook the arena. Abel watched as his brother was carried off, his mind numb.

"Prince Abel!"

Only after he heard her voice did the tension drain from his shoulders.

Chapter 55: A Lunch Adventure... You Can Cry, Keithwood

Abel was on a roll.

His next two matches were against older students, and he won them both. With three straight victories under his belt, it was time for lunch. He made his way toward one corner of the courtyard. Bathed in the gentle sunshine, the soft grass radiated a comfortable warmth. Anne and Chloe had placed a mat on the ground, on top of which they were laying out food. Beside them stood Mia, who beamed at him as he approached.

"That was absolutely amazing, Prince Abel!"

She waved both arms at him, her expression brimming with excitement.

"Thanks," he said with an embarrassed smile, "but I couldn't have done it without you cheering for me the whole way through."

"Don't be so modest, now. It's the fruit of all your hard work," she replied, though the way she hummed gleefully to herself suggested she wouldn't be too upset if his modesty continued. "I must say, though, you really are very good. I had absolutely no idea."

Abel's remarkable performance had been completely unexpected for her.

Who would have thought he'd be this strong. At this rate, maybe he'll even manage to knock Prince Sion off his high horse! What a sight that would be!

Mia was not particularly interested in getting back at Sion or Tiona; that kind of drastic action was simply too dangerous, as she would risk incurring their wrath. One wrong move, and it'd be the guillotine all over again. She'd rather just keep her distance. However, if she didn't need to put herself at risk... If the Anti-Sion Party could find itself a new champion, she'd be all over that in a heartbeat. Heck, propriety was the only thing stopping her from holding up a big "Let's go Abel" sign and screaming her support at

the top of her lungs.

"At this rate, first place seems well within your reach."

"Uh... That's maybe aiming a little too high. I mean, Prince Sion is still in the tournament. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"You'll be fine, Prince Abel. I know you'll win. Believe in yourself," Mia declared with overblown confidence. She pumped her fist at Abel. "You are strong, so please, when Prince Sion shows up, give that good-for-no—"

"Hm? What was that about me, Princess Mia?"

"Wha—?! Prince Sion?!"

Mia jumped in surprise before wheeling around to discover Sion, Keithwood, Tiona, and Liora standing behind her.

Wh-Wh-What in the moons are they doing here?!

She'd already given Sion's sandwich to Tiona to deliver. By now, they should have been eating lunch elsewhere. She threw a questioning glance at Tiona, only for her to give Mia a thumbs up and a winking smile that seemed to say, "Don't worry. I got you covered."

"Lady Rudolvon here suggested that since you all had a hand in making these, we might as well join you in consuming them. I hope I'm not imposing?"

"N-N-No, not at all. F-Feel free to join us... Ohoho."

Mia felt the muscles in her face twitch as she forced herself to smile.

Why you little... After turning me down over and over in the other timeline, now you just casually show up and invite yourself on in?!

Indeed, in the previous timeline, as a result of having her request declined by Sion, Mia was forced to spend the whole tournament day alone, sniffling miserably and eating the lunch she'd prepared all by herself. Taking that into consideration, Sion's current attitude was... understandably grating. The way he smiled softly as he chatted with Tiona and Anne lit a fire of indignant anger in Mia's heart, which...

"Hey, what a funny sandwich."

...immediately dissipated upon hearing Abel's comment.

"M-My, you noticed?"

In the blink of an eye, Mia reverted to her nervous, fidgety self. Seeing Abel pick up the sandwich she'd made gave her butterflies in her stomach.

He's... He's looking at my sandwich. Oh! Please! Don't stare at it

like that! It makes me nervous.

Mia gulped. Her expression hardened into an intense stare as she awaited Abel's reaction. Her eyes grew wider and wider until...

"Oh, I see! It's a horse," he said with a laugh before taking a big bite out of it. "Mmm. Delicious. This is a really good sandwich."

Her wide-eyed stare was immediately replaced by a bright smile.

"That's wonderful to hear. I'm glad you like it."

Hearing her sandwich praised made Mia feel all warm and fuzzy on the inside. She felt an urge to throw her arms up in glee. After all, the most distinctive feature about the sandwich was obviously the fact that it was shaped like a horse. And who was the one to propose that brilliant idea? It was, of course, Mia herself. Was it not reasonable, then, to interpret all the compliments made toward the sandwich as being made toward her? Thus was the questionable logic taking shape in Mia's head.

Never mind that the meticulous selection of ingredients, careful consideration of their placement, and painstaking application of edible adhesive was all carried out by Keithwood. All his blood, sweat, and tears had amounted to nothing, their significance so trifling to Mia that they'd been wiped clean from her memory.

...You can cry, Keithwood. It's okay. We understand.

"Prince Abel, do you have a moment?"

After bantering with Tiona and the girls, Sion approached Abel.

"Prince Sion? What is it?"

Abel frowned, wondering what the rival prince wanted from him.

"I'm somewhat late in saying this, but congratulations on your first victory over your brother."

"Ah, well, thank you very much," replied Abel with an honest smile.

Then, Sion lowered his head.

"I also owe you an apology."

"Hm? What for?"

"I thought for sure that you would lose. The difference in skill between you and your brother had seemed far too apparent."

My! How rude! There's no way Prince Abel would have lost to a bonehead like his brother!

Mia's opinion of Sion decreased by a few points. Abel, however, simply smiled and shook his head.

"No, I think your assessment was correct. I'm only winning because I keep getting lucky. I'm not winning through my skills like you are."

My, how modest!

Mia's opinion of Abel increased by a few points.

"Luck is an important factor, Prince Abel. I couldn't have made it this far on pure skill alone either."

Well, of course you couldn't. That goes without saying. You're only winning because you keep getting lucky!

Mia agreed with Sion's assessment of himself.

"It's a privilege and an honor to hear that from you, Prince Sion. I'll take it to heart."

Though Mia objected to *that* statement pretty strongly.

It totally isn't, Prince Abel! So what if this jerk praised you? Who cares what he says? There's no need to make a big deal about it!

"Regardless, let's make the next match a good one."

Sion held out his hand, projecting a natural confidence with his easy smile. It was a gesture of many things: trust, rivalry, and mutual respect — an honorable pact between two young men to each give his all in their upcoming duel. In that moment, a new friendship was born. To Mia's side, Chloe let out an enraptured sigh.

"...So *dreamy*."

Anne and Tiona seemed equally mesmerized by the two princes as they watched with wide, spellbound eyes. As for Liora... She poked at the meat in the sandwich, confirmed that it was well-roasted, and nodded to herself in satisfaction.

Liora, you see, was a girl who knew what was important.

Likewise, Mia also had little interest in the boys' burgeoning friendship. If anything, she was rather upset that just when things had been getting good between her and Abel, Sion showed up and robbed her of his attention. So, in a display of petulance characteristic of her age, the young princess produced her angry-puffer-fish cheeks and quietly sulked as she nibbled on a sandwich.

Then again, for someone who was technically twenty, her behavior was rather ridiculous...

And Prince Abel had just complimented my sandwich, too! Would you stop getting in the way already? fumed Mia as she gave Abel's sleeve a quick tug. When he turned to her, she looked straight into his eyes. *Remember my sandwich? Remember how good it was? Why*

don't you praise it some more, hm?

Mia, you see, was a girl who... was actually just kind of annoying.

Seeing Sion extend his hand, Abel defaulted to his usual innocuous smile. It was a smile of convenience — one that said nothing and committed nothing. It made no enemies and created no hostility. But that was all. It had no further substance.

Wearing his usual smile, he had intended to say, "Yes, let's make it a good match."

He'd imagined himself losing.

"I don't know how much of a fight I'll put up, but I'll try my best. If nothing else, it'll be a good learning experience for me," he'd say in advance. It helped him to stop hoping. To stop caring. That way, he wouldn't feel the pain when he ultimately failed.

It was a part of him — the lens through which he saw the world and the way in which he navigated it. He'd done so since childhood. It was how he'd survived. But now...

Hm? What?

He felt a tug. Turning around, he found Mia's fingers on his sleeve. He looked at her. She held his gaze, her eyes beautiful and intense and *filled* with emotion. They seemed to speak to him. Words echoed in his mind.

You are strong, Prince Abel.

He heard her voice. He remembered what she'd said.

You are strong. Trust in yourself. I know you'll win.

She'd told him so.

Then I...

Something shifted in his mind. A gear, perhaps, or a spoke. And then the clockwork of logic reversed its torque.

...have no choice but to win.

To keep her words from becoming untrue... To protect the sanctity of her unwavering trust...

"Prepare yourself, Prince Sion."

Words flowed from his lips, the voice familiar but the tone foreign. What was this? He'd never heard it before. Then, he realized — it was determination.

"Prepare yourself, Sion Sol Sunkland."

"Hm?"

Sion gave him a puzzled look.

"I... Abel Remno... will *not* lose."

Sion regarded the young prince, who'd responded to his promise of sportsmanship with a declaration of war... and *grinned.*

"Is that so? Challenge accepted then, Abel Remno. Let us duel to our hearts' content. It would be my pleasure to crush you with all my might."

Faced with these fiery exchanges, the spectating trio of Chloe, Anne, and Tiona couldn't help but swoon and sigh. Even Liora, who'd been poking at her sandwich meat again, couldn't help but swoon and sigh... at how well it was roasted.

B-But... my sandwich... what about my sandwich...?

Mia, meanwhile, also mulled sadly over her sandwich, at the tragedy of it being ignored, and let out a helpless sigh.

Chapter 56: The Swordsmanship Tournament 2: Grand Finals

"Let us begin our next and final match; Prince Sion, Prince Abel, please step into the arena."

The two princes slowly made their way into the dueling area. A large number of students had gathered to watch the match. As the crown prince of a great kingdom who was widely known to be a prodigy with the sword, Sion naturally attracted a lot of attention. Abel, however, was no slouch. As a first-year student, his relentless streak of victories made him rather magnetic as well.

Geez, who'd have thought it'd end up like this. I have to say, I wasn't expecting to become the center of so much attention.

With a wry smile, Abel bowed to Sion. Then, he raised his unsheathed sword high above his head. It was the first stance of the style of swordsmanship passed down through the Remno royalty. In contrast to Abel's extremely aggressive stance, Sion held his sword loosely in a low one, the point far below his waist.

Sion's swordplay reflected his genius. Through masterful use of deflections and parries, he would wear his opponent down, waiting for the perfect moment to strike. His style was one of counterattacks; his sword stung through the riposte. Each strike was fatal, as he attacked only when his opponent was completely vulnerable. With their weapon parried and their balance lost, they had no way of avoiding the single, match-ending stroke of his sword. It was a style that was impossible for all but the most brilliant of swordsmen, as it demanded absolute confidence in one's ability to withstand every form of attack the opponent might thrust at you. It was, therefore, impossible for Abel.

Abel Remno was an ordinary person. He'd been aware of his mediocrity from the day he was born, but it had been a vague recognition. That all changed one day when he'd crossed swords with Sion. The experience taught him many things: that geniuses existed, that some were just born better, and that it was a gap he'd

never close. He'd seen it first-hand — felt it through his sword — and he knew himself to be inferior. It was the day he accepted his mediocrity in full.

And so, he gave up. It seemed to him the sensible choice. Some people just had more talent. He could try all he wanted, but he'd never catch up. Therefore, he'd stopped trying. It was a perfectly rational decision.

Then he came to Saint-Noel Academy, met Mia... and something changed. A raw desire began to grow within him. He didn't want to lose to Sion. He wanted to win, and by winning, show that Mia was right to believe in him.

Alas, reality was cruel. The cleft between their talent was as deep as ever, and it swallowed his desire whole. Had his opponent grown indulgent in his genius and stopped putting in effort, he might yet win through diligence and hard work. Unfortunately, Sion was no such slouch. Though he was born with a gift, he never rested on his laurels. Abel practiced, but so did Sion. Faced with a prodigy who put in as much work as the everyman, no amount of improvement would ever be enough. The gap would only get bigger...

A normal approach would never work. Therefore, Abel threw away what was normal. In hindsight, it was simple. If he'd never be a better swordsman, he just needed to be a better something else. He had to pare his training. Narrow his focus. Throw away defence... Throw away feints... Throw away spins... Throw away thrusts...

He focused every ounce of his efforts on one single thing. He raised his sword, and he swung it down. He repeated it. Then he did it again, faster. And faster. He devoted all his time to honing the motion. Ever since the night of the dance party, he'd done nothing else. Day after day, he poured his heart and soul into practicing that one swing. And now, after all the sweat and fatigue and pain, it was time.

He swung.

Today, he would conquer genius.

Today, he would slay a god!

Ker-chiiiiing!

A harsh, grating sound filled his ears. Half a second later, his hands felt the reverberating shock. He knew. Metal met metal; his attack had failed.

It still… wasn't enough.

Despair gripped him. The world went dark. He waited for the end. He waited, and waited…

But the end didn't come.

The world came back into focus. Their swords were still clashed, and he… was winning? Suddenly, he noticed that they were at the edge of the arena, and Sion was a step away from exiting the ring.

"Didn't you say you weren't going to hold back?" said Abel with an angry grimace.

Sion responded with a pained smile.

"I apologize for not living up to your expectations, but circumstances," he said through gritted teeth, "seem to be *forcing my hand*."

"Are you mocking…"

Abel had taken the remark as an affront, but he reconsidered when he saw a drop of sweat roll down the side of Sion's face.

"Or maybe not. Well, whatever the case…" Abel took a step back and reverted to his overhead stance. "It doesn't matter to me. My repertoire is rather limited, after all."

He swung again.

"Ugh!"

Sion narrowly dodged the strike; the blade missed him by a hair. He wasn't trying to show off. The swing was simply so fast that a narrow dodge was all he could manage.

Damn, I certainly wasn't expecting this…

He'd never discounted Abel's abilities — he was fully aware of the dangers of underestimating an opponent. Nevertheless, Abel's swing was *ferocious*, coming at him with a speed and power that vastly exceeded his expectations. He barely managed to wedge his own sword between the oncoming blade and his own face. There was no time to parry, resulting in his arms bearing the full force of the brutal impact.

I can barely feel my arms. The last time they went this numb was when I trained with Father.

This one strike had left him in a terribly disadvantageous position. He could barely keep his sword in his hands, never mind trying to counterattack. However...

It bears repeating that Sion Sol Sunkland was a true genius. One strike was all he needed to grasp the range of Abel's swing.

"Haa!"

Abel's second swing came. This time, he evaded it purely through footwork.

Still, it's a good thing I only have to deal with the overhead swing. Otherwise...

It quickly dawned on Sion that he could dodge the overhead swing solely because it was the only thing he needed to watch for. If Abel mixed any other motions into his repertoire... They didn't need to have the same force. So long as they provided a tiny bit of variety and kept opponents on their toes, they'd create openings for his match-ending power stroke.

The thought sent a shiver through Sion. He saw the potential within Abel, and the danger.

Anyway, I have to wait for my arms to recover. I don't know how many more seconds it's going to take, but...

A question occurred to him, and he decided to ask it.

"Tell me something, Prince Abel... What is it that makes you so strong? Is it, perhaps... Princess Mia?"

"That's correct. It's *her*. She believes in me. She wishes for my victory. Therefore... I cannot afford to lose."

"I thought so..." Sion let out a quiet sigh. "I wish I were in your shoes." Then his eyes narrowed and he held up his sword. "However, I cannot afford to lose either."

They both remained motionless. He felt the numbness in his arms receding. A little longer, and he'd be ready. As he — and the whole arena — waited with bated breath, a drop of rain landed on the point of his blade.

Chapter 57: The True Essence of Princess Mia — Keithwood's Delusion

Hmm... Sion got cocky.

Keithwood calmly observed the match from the spectator area.

Looks like his talents got the better of him. He thought he could handle the first strike. Granted, it's pretty rare to see a swing that he can't parry...

Sion continued to dance around Abel's swings, dodging them with the narrowest of margins. Each slash whistled menacingly as it split the air. Even a single hit would have devastating consequences. Nevertheless, his expert evasion ensured they never found their mark. Sion was a genius with the sword — both offensively and defensively — and his mastery was currently on full display.

Prince Abel, though... Sure didn't expect him to pose such a threat.

When they first arrived at Saint-Noel, Keithwood had kept close tabs on Abel's skill with the sword. At the time, Abel was undoubtedly a mediocre swordsman. He should have been no match for a prodigy like Sion, and yet here he was, steadily gaining the upper hand.

Hah. Go figure. Looks like I *misjudged Prince Abel's potential as well.*

At this point, Keithwood could clearly see Abel's latent gift. The Remno prince's talent lay in the fact that he knew himself well — he could calmly and objectively evaluate his own abilities. Fully aware of his own mediocrity, he nevertheless refused to give up. Instead, he thought up a plan to defeat his opponent and carried it out tirelessly.

Knowledge of oneself. Knowledge of the opponent. Knowledge of the goal and how to accomplish it.

Those were qualities no less impressive than Sion's natural genius. In fact, they would likely become increasingly valuable for both the Remno prince and his kingdom in the future.

The essential qualities of a king, huh. I see. Should Prince Abel become King of Remno, that kingdom is going to become much stronger...

Abel's talents had begun to bloom. For the common folk, the birth of a wise monarch was undoubtedly a blessing. For Keithwood, though...

As someone who serves Sion, this certainly leaves me with some mixed feelings. If relations with Remno go sour down the line, this'll only make our lives harder. He's going to be a scary one. Speaking of which... Keithwood turned his attention to the young girl who hadn't looked away from the match since it started. *I guess the one I should truly be afraid of is Princess Mia.*

Behind all of this, there was a mastermind who'd laid down the pieces and set everything into motion. While Abel's efforts were definitely praiseworthy and his talents deserved both recognition and due caution, he was not, in fact, the initiator of his own metamorphosis. He'd been given a push. Keithwood was acutely aware of the existence of someone behind the scenes, someone who'd arranged for all of this to happen.

"I see. It's all coming together now..." he mused. "Princess Mia is an individual who cherishes talent."

He finally came to see the true essence of Princess Mia. She so valued the talent that slept within Prince Abel and couldn't stand to see it go to waste, forever buried under the weight of being compared to his brother and Sion. Thinking back on it, it all made sense. It would have been easy for her to select Sion as her dance partner during the welcoming party. If her moniker "The Great Sage" had even a lick of truth to it, she would have seen that Sion was an exceptionally talented young man. Nevertheless, she'd chosen Abel, all for the purpose of bringing his latent talents to light.

Suddenly, Keithwood froze. A chill ran up his spine as something dawned on him.

Wait a minute. No... No no no. It's not that simple.

Cherishing talent was definitely a kingly quality. A ruler who welcomed a talented enemy as a new subject, so long as they swore their allegiance anew, was a ruler whose kingdom would quickly grow in strength. While it was a laudable trait for a monarch to have, it was not a noteworthy one. Both Sion and the King of Sunkland actively courted talent, and most wise rulers throughout

history had done the same.

...Prince Abel, however, was no subject. No new allegiances would be sworn. In addition, when they first met, the Kingdom of Remno and the Empire of Tearmoon were not even friendly, much less allied. Despite the fact that it was entirely possible that Remno might become an enemy kingdom, Mia still cherished his talent.

Why? What did that say about her?

Do the eyes of Princess Mia see no borders? Is her view of the world unbound by the shackles of race and country? Keithwood inhaled sharply as the implications of his realization came into full focus. *By the sun... She doesn't care. Enemies, allies, such concepts are trivial to her. To her, the matter is simple. She recognized the talent in a man, and she was loath to see it go to waste.*

Furthermore, it was likely that the degree of talent mattered little to her. She'd taken an extremely merciful stance toward Tiona's harassers. She'd gone as far as to personally plead with Rafina for their forgiveness. He'd heard that as a result, the offenders — foolish and talentless individuals as they doubtlessly were — now applied themselves to their studies with renewed zeal in an effort to repay her kindness.

She sees the talents sleeping in every person and refuses to rest until they are made to blossom. That is the true essence of the Great Sage of the Empire.

The height from which she saw the world was utterly breathtaking. It was a perspective that surpassed even his own beloved lord. Keithwood was keenly aware that amidst the newfound awe he felt for the Tearmoon princess, there was also something else — a budding admiration. He had to pointedly remind himself that his allegiance lay solely with his lord, Sion.

If there ever comes a day when Sunkland and Tearmoon stop seeing eye to eye... I'd better advise Sion to at least stay on good terms with Princess Mia herself.

Keithwood quietly made a fist as he committed the thought to memory.

...It goes without saying, of course, that all of this existed solely in Keithwood's head. It was nothing more than a delusion. An awfully imaginative one, but nevertheless a delusion. He believed it with all his heart and soul, but that didn't change the fact that it was a delusion. It was the delusion to end all delusions.

And unfortunately — or perhaps fortunately — the chances of him ridding himself of this delusion were very, very low.

Chapter 58: The Swordsmanship Tournament 3: Promise of a Rematch

Ker-chiiiing!

The harsh screech of blade meeting blade echoed for the second time since the match began. With this sound came a change in momentum that seemed like just a subtle shift to the onlookers.

To the fighters in the ring, it was night and day.

“So, you’ve finally stopped holding back, huh?” remarked Abel, grimacing from the sensation of the clash. Or rather, the lack thereof. It would have been better if his sword had been deflected back at him. Instead, his slash had met little resistance, its momentum having been perfectly parried to the side. He nearly toppled over but managed to keep his balance by forcefully digging his heels into the ground.

“You know, I’m not sure how I can get you to believe me on this, but I’ve been trying my best this whole time.” Sion quietly regarded Abel for a few seconds before his lips curled up in amusement.

“I have to say, knowing might be half the battle, but it really is only half. I had a hell of a time trying to parry that strike even though I know exactly where it’s coming from. That overhead swing of yours really is something,” he said with a grin as he loosened his grip on his sword and returned to his lower stance. “Out of respect for the sheer power of your swing, allow me to offer you some friendly advice, Prince Abel. If you try the same move on me even one more time... then this match will immediately end in your defeat.”

Sion’s smile changed; now it showed teeth. Abel instinctively knew the Sunkland prince was not kidding around.

“So you say. In that case, there is only one thing for me to do.”

Abel raised his sword high above his head. The same position, the same angle, the exact same attack. He changed nothing, boldly presenting Sion with the same all-out aggression of the Remno-style

first stance as before.

"Should I take this to mean you surrender?" The hint of a frown appeared on Sion's brow. In response, Abel laughed. It was not the laughter of surrender.

"What? Surrender? No, Prince Sion. This is how I win."

"Is that so? Fair enough. I see that I have not given you due respect. Allow me to redress my affront, Abel Remno, by defeating you with the best of my bladework."

Had Abel listened to Sion and changed his approach, he would surely have lost. No attack of his could hope to penetrate the intricate defense of Sion's masterful swordplay. No matter, he did not waver. He stayed in the same stance and prepared to unleash the attack that he felt most confident in. Shining from his eyes was not a resigned acceptance of defeat but a fierce hunger for victory. He maintained the same stance not out of desperation, but determination. It was a declaration. This would not be the same attack. He would swing harder, faster, and with even more power than before.

Sion acknowledged the wordless challenge. He now saw Abel not as a mere opponent but as a respected rival — one who had boldly bet all his chips on his only path to victory. It was only appropriate, then, for Sion to match this resolve. There would be no holding back. The two of them slowly approached one another, stopping just short of striking distance. It had started to pour, but despite the fat drops of rain slamming against their faces and bodies, neither of them blinked. Abel was in a state of intense concentration, focused entirely on unleashing his most powerful attack on Sion. It was, therefore, understandable for him to forget the context of this situation.

This was no battle, much less a duel to the death. It was a friendly match between students meant for fun and entertainment. Since it had started to rain, and there was certainly no need for competitors to risk illness or injury, naturally...

"That's it! Both competitors, swords down!"

The referee called for the match to end.

"Wha—?!"

Abel looked around half-dazed, unsure of what had just happened.

"As I expected. Well, I suppose that's that."

Sion sheathed his sword and shrugged. Apparently, he'd been

fully aware of this possibility and was entirely unsurprised by the referee's decision.

"I have every intention of finishing this match... but the earliest chance will likely be this winter, during the next swordsmanship tournament," he said with a smile. "What do you say, Prince Abel? Do I have your word that we will cross swords again?"

Sion extended his hand.

"You bet we will."

And this time, Abel took it.

And so, the final match of the tournament ended with a firm handshake.

"Prince Abel!"

Mia ran over to Abel as soon as he came down from the arena. She looked up at her champion, who'd come within an inch of vanquishing her archnemesis, and bombarded him with praise and vicarious frustration.

"That was amazing! But oooh, you were so close! Just a little bit more, and— Hnnngh!"

"Huh? Oh, uh, thanks, Princess Mia," stammered a bewildered Abel. "But, um, if we'd kept going, I probably would have—"

"This must be a curse!" Completely oblivious to his reaction, she continued ranting. "It has to be. I bet someone wished for rain or something — some petty jerk out there who didn't want to see you win! You were *so* close! Hnnngh! Interfering with an honorable match like this... Unforgivable! It's playing dirty is what it is!"

...Let us quickly return to the previous timeline for a moment. For the record, after finishing her very lonely lunch, Mia spent the rest of her day holed up in her room alone feeling very sorry for herself. During that time, she happened to overhear that Sion was close to winning the tournament. So she sat and prayed with all her heart for rain to come, and when a sudden shower forced the tournament to conclude prematurely, she'd shouted in triumph.

In other words, she'd completely forgotten that the "petty jerk" who'd "played dirty" had been none other than herself.

Thus, the first swordsmanship tournament of the year was concluded early due to rain, and the two princes traded promises of a rematch. What they didn't know, however, was that their chance would come much sooner than they thought and under

circumstances neither of them could have predicted. It would take place not within an arena but on a battlefield, both of them putting their lives on the line...

But that is a story for later.

Chapter 59: The Dreams and Memories of a Cold-Stricken Mia

"Uuugh... Uuuuugh..."

Mia groaned as she lay in bed, suffering from a bout of illness. On the day of the swordsmanship tournament, she'd stood outside in the rain, getting soaking wet as she watched the riveting match between Abel and Sion. After its conclusion, she'd quickly run over to Abel to lavish him with praise. Already thrilled by his performance, her excitement reached a peak when he pointed out how the sunlight dancing off her wet hair gave it a dazzling new luster. As a result, despite Anne's repeated attempts to convince her to dry herself off, she spent the rest of the day running around with her hair wet, which promptly led to her catching a cold.

At just past midday, Mia slowly opened her eyes.

"Anne? Are you there? Anne?"

Her eyes still heavy with sleep, she took a slow look around the room.

"My, how odd," she murmured in a puzzled tone.

It was completely silent. No one was there but her. The room was a mess. Only a cursory attempt had been made to fold the clothes that were strewn about, and pens had been left uncovered on the desk. Though it was clearly poorly managed, the sense of disarray in the room felt strangely familiar.

Ah, I know... This was from...

She remembered a time during the previous timeline when she'd also been sick with a cold.

"That's right. I remember. When I woke up... That girl wasn't there."

After Mia had fallen asleep, the girl who served as her maid-in-waiting had left her to go outside. Being the third daughter of a powerful noble family, she was never lacking in smiles or flattery when in her presence. She had always been a favorite, and Mia found her generous compliments to be music to the ears.

I remember overhearing from others later that she didn't want to catch my cold, so she went to have tea with her attendant friends...

Having woken up completely alone, the bright rays of the afternoon sun illuminating the emptiness of her room, she felt suddenly very small. An overwhelming sense of dread took hold of her heart. She tightened her grip on her covers and closed her eyes, feeling as though she'd been left behind in a barren world all by herself.

"Milady... Milady..."

She felt her body being shaken. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

"Milady Mia, are you okay?"

Anne's worried face appeared in view.

"Fwha? Oh, Anne... Then... was that a dream?"

Confused, she took a nervous look around the room. It was perfectly tidy. Had someone cleaned up while she was sleeping? There wasn't a stray shirt in sight. Not only that, but something about the room felt reassuring. She could feel the tension seeping out of her. It was the opposite of the room in her dream. That one made her feel uneasy, as though it didn't belong to her at all.

"You've been very restless. Did you have a bad dream?"

"Oh... D-Don't worry about it."

Anne let out a sigh of relief and sat down again. She'd moved a chair to her bedside and seemed to have been watching over Mia all this time.

"Anne, you should stay away... or you'll catch this cold, too..."

"What are you talking about, milady? I'm super healthy, so don't worry about me," Anne declared with her hands on her hips. "Stop thinking about so many things and just let yourself rest for now."

Then she removed the cloth on Mia's forehead and replaced it with a new one. A comfortable sensation of coolness permeated her feverish forehead, and Mia quickly drifted off into slumber again.

"Princess Mia, look. That girl's reading by herself again."

"My, is she now?"

It was early afternoon, and one of the members of Mia's retinue smirked and pointed to the corner of the classroom where Chloe sat. Chloe didn't exist in Mia's memories of her past life. They had never been friends, and there was almost no interaction between them

whatsoever. Therefore, Mia had no recollection of what had happened on this day.

"Say, Princess Mia, what do you think about that Chloe girl?"

"I heard she bought her title, with *money*. I can't believe the academy would let in someone like that."

As Mia's entourage took turns making fun of Chloe, Mia didn't participate, but she didn't stop them either.

"I don't see what you find so interesting about her. More importantly, have you heard? Apparently, Prince Sion's attendant is a commoner, but *very* handsome..."

"Ah, Princess Mia. Are you awake?"

When she woke up again, Chloe was at her side.

"Ah, Chloe..."

Chloe quietly closed the book in her hands and leaned in.

"Is there anything you'd like me to do for you? Would you like some water? Or something to eat?"

"Thank you for coming to see me, but you shouldn't come too close to me or you'll catch... What's that?"

Mia couldn't help but ask when she noticed the white fabric covering the bottom half of Chloe's face, obscuring both her nose and mouth.

"It's a sort of mask, and it stops colds from spreading."

Mia was impressed. The daughters of wealthy merchants were not to be underestimated. They clearly knew their stuff.

"Anne went to go get some more cold water. Oh, and I brought some cold medicines that my dad sent me a while ago. I'll leave them here. Please make sure you take them later," said Chloe with a smile.

Mia bit her lip. After a moment, she said in a soft voice, "I... owe you an apology."

"Huh?"

She disregarded the blank look Chloe was giving her and continued.

"That day, I saw your suffering... and I chose to ignore it. I'm terribly sorry for that."

"...Um, Princess Mia, was that a dream you had or something?"

The young merchant girl giggled.

A dream... Maybe it was.

Perhaps it really hadn't happened. And even if it had, it was

from a time long gone. What difference was there between a future that never came to pass and a dream? Perhaps they were one and the same. The guilt, however, was real. She could feel the dull pain of it pressing down on her heart.

"Princess Mia, ever since you became my friend, I've had so much fun. I really enjoy doing things with you, like when we made sandwiches together. Moreover, I get to talk to you about the stories I read. I've always dreamed of having a friend like you. So please, there's nothing you need to apologize for."

As she listened, Mia felt the weight on her heart grow just a tad lighter. Her eyelids drooped again, and she whispered softly, "Could you... tell me a story..."

"Hm?"

"Something I'd like you to do... If you've read any interesting stories lately... Could you tell me one?"

"All right, then. Let's see. In that case..."

Feeling the breathy tickle of Chloe's soft voice in her ears, Mia drifted off to sleep once more.

"Well. Take care on the road then, Lady Tiona."

It was the last day before summer vacation. Sion was sending Tiona off with a bright smile. She leaned out the window and smiled back. Only after her carriage began rounding a corner did she sit down again.

Numerous people had gathered around Sion, all hoping to bid him farewell. The growing crowd made Mia increasingly anxious, but she continued to exchange farewells with her own group of girls.

"Princess Mia, my father would love to have a chance to meet you in person."

"As would I. May I have the honor of paying my respects in person to you and His Imperial Majesty during the summer?"

"No, you must come visit us first! Though our kingdom is small, it's a wonderful summer resort."

As she went through the motions of addressing their requests one by one, she kept sneaking glances at Sion. Once, he looked back in her direction and their gazes met. His normally-bright eyes suddenly grew cold. For a second, his expression darkened. Then, he looked away, as though he'd already lost interest in her.

Mia saw the shift in his expression, but she had no idea what it

meant.

I do wonder why Prince Sion isn't coming to say goodbye... Ah, I know. He must feel awkward after turning down my lunchbox. Oh, he's so silly. Does he really think I'd hold that against him?

Mia remained completely oblivious to the sentiments of Sion and Tiona until the fires of revolution began to rage. Not only that, she didn't even have a good grasp on what the girls of her own retinue were thinking. Never did she spare a thought for the feelings of others. Not even once... until the world as she knew it came to an end. That was why...

During the last year she spent at Saint-Noel before strife consumed the land — when the Empire had begun to collapse under the weight of its own financial problems and violent riots started to spread — Mia found herself alone on the final day of school.

"How... did it come to this?"

There remained not a single person who bothered to come say farewell. None of the other Tearmoon nobles were in any condition to be sending their children to school, and students of other kingdoms had no desire to associate with the princess of a falling empire.

She was alone now. Truly and undeniably alone.

As she wandered the courtyard, she found Sion. Surrounded by a crowd of students, he was popular as always. When he saw her, he fixed her with a cold, harsh look and, in a voice that could cut steel, said, "I *despise* you, Princess Mia."

"Hyaaaaaaaaah!"

Mia screamed as she sprang up from her bed. She was soaked in sweat.

"Ah... A-Ah... It was... a dream?"

A cup appeared in front of her. She grabbed it and gulped down its contents. Cool, refreshing water soothed her parched throat.

"Thank you. I needed that."

"You're very welcome. Are you okay, though? I assume you were having some sort of nightmare, considering how violently you were tossing and turning."

A hand touched her forehead. It was nice and cool. She was about to close her eyes and enjoy how good it felt when the voice began to fully register in her mind.

W-Wait... Don't I know this voice...?

Slowly, she craned her neck to the side and ventured a nervous peek.

"Eeeeek!!"

She started and let out a yelp of surprise when she saw the person's face.

"P-Prince... Abel? But, but... What are you doing here?"

His gaze was gentle, and his voice was soft.

"Right, sorry about that. I know I shouldn't be watching a lady sleep, but Miss Anne asked me to keep an eye on you for a bit."

Mia had a vision of Anne giving her the thumbs up.

I know you think you're helping, Anne, but you're helping in all the wrong ways!

She pulled her covers all the way up to her mouth.

"Thank you very much for coming to see me, but you shouldn't stay here. I wouldn't want you to catch a cold from me."

"You know, I wouldn't mind getting sick."

"Huh? What do you mean."

"Oh, it's just, uh, where I'm from, they say you can get rid of someone's cold by catching it yourself. If it really works, then I'd want nothing more than to catch your cold so you'll get better." With a mixture of amusement and embarrassment, he scratched his head and laughed.

"My..."

His youthful charm elicited a giggle from Mia as well, and the two of them indulged in some friendly banter for a while.

"Speaking of which, it's almost time for summer vacation," said Mia.

"Will you be going back to the Empire?"

"Yes, I will. There are a lot of things I'd like to do back home. I plan to stay there until school starts up again."

A long vacation didn't mean she could just sit around and dawdle. She had to do as much as she could to save herself from that looming guillotine.

"What do you plan to do, Prince Abel?"

"I'm going home as well, but I plan to come back to school a little earlier. I was hoping I'd have a chance to spend some time with you then, but it looks like I won't be so lucky this summer."

H-How is it that he can say things like that with a perfectly straight face? Oh, my heart...

Mia quickly averted her gaze and willed herself to calm down. Just as she was about to take a deep breath, she heard a knock on the door.

"Oh, that reminds me. Prince Sion and Lady Tiona mentioned that they were going to come by later. That must be them."

"My, I seem to be quite the celebrity today."

Of course, in her head, she was thinking, *Ugh, what a nuisance. As if the cold wasn't bad enough.*

Then, she frowned. There was a strange dissonance between her words and her emotions. For some reason, she didn't feel as annoyed by their visit as she'd thought. She decided to chalk it up to all the sleep she'd gotten. Even her fever seemed to be receding, as she noticed her head felt much lighter.

"Excuse us," said Sion as the door opened. "Hello, Princess Mia. How are you feeling? Is it a bad cold?"

"I brought you something to help with the fever," added Tiona. "My younger brother made it with the herbs he grows. It's nothing fancy, so I hope you won't mind..."

Gradually, a friendly, pleasant atmosphere filled Mia's room. It was a kind of ambience that had been thoroughly absent from her previous life, and she spent the remainder of the day in its gentle embrace, enjoying the welcoming warmth of companionship.

Short Story: Princess Mia… Finds Friendship Through Mutual (Mis-?)Understanding

"You're making this rather difficult, Lord Radnor. The collection of taxes is vital to the well-being of the Empire. As a noble, I'm sure you're well aware of your obligation to pay them…" Ludwig said to the middle-aged man standing before him.

They were in the manor of the Baron of Radnor, and judging from the ugly grimace on the man's face, Lord Radnor was not glad to see them. Ludwig sighed.

"Here, you see, is the amount you reported to the Golden Moon Ministry." He handed the baron a parchment with numbers written on it. "And here is the amount you actually collected from the people of your barony. Now, if I could draw your attention to the rather conspicuous discrepancy between them, which I hope will make clear the purpose of my visit…"

He stopped himself from adding, "you thieving bastard," but he couldn't withhold a tsk.

Parchment isn't cheap, you know.

"Certainly, certainly. It's not that I'm opposed to paying, you see," said Lord Radnor, barely managing to maintain a strained smile as he scanned the parchment, "but I can't help but wonder what would happen if Lord Bluemoon were to hear…"

The Baron was referring to one of the Four Dukes of Tearmoon, Lord Bluemoon, whose faction he belonged to.

"…That a good friend of his was being harassed so aggressively over the matter of taxes. I trust you understand my concern?"

Radnor put on a face that was likely meant to intimidate, but Ludwig simply shrugged.

"Of course. I'm perfectly aware that if Lord Bluemoon were to learn that a bit of tax evasion might sour his own relations with Her Highness, it would be rather worrisome… for *you*," he said, regarding the baron through his glasses.

Seeing that Ludwig was completely undaunted by his threat, Radnor's expression clouded with unease for the first time. As the implications of Ludwig's statement fully dawned on him, he realized the precariousness of his situation. The duke would have to consider whether Radnor was worth protecting if it came at the cost of worsening Mia's impression of him. Between a baron and the Princess, which way would the scales tip?

Of course, in reality, the Duke of Bluemoon would undoubtedly lodge a formal complaint if he heard that a mere Golden Moon official had the nerve to reprimand a noble from his own faction. Even with the Princess's backing, Bluemoon would still be a formidable foe. The Four Dukes had so much power in the Empire that even Mia herself had to tread carefully around them, never mind a mere government official like him.

That was why it was vital that Ludwig assume this attitude of supreme confidence. The slightest hint of apprehension would shatter the facade and allow Radnor to regain his composure. Seeing that the baron was visibly shaken, he continued his assault.

"I ask merely that the correct amount be paid. The discrepancy between your original report and your... late payment are of little concern. Her Highness has no intention of taking issue with such matters. She has said — and I quote — 'Anyone can make a mistake.'"

Ludwig was making it clear that so long as the baron paid up, he'd let the whole thing slide. Rather than submitting a false return, the incident would be recorded as an accounting error or a transcription mistake — not intentional tax evasion but an oversight that led to a payment delay. Ludwig took the carrot of simultaneously avoiding both a criminal charge and a potential power struggle with the princess and placed it onto Radnor's proverbial scale. It tipped immediately.

"W-Well, in that case..." The baron put on a servile smile and nodded. "I shall have the sum prepared immediately. After coming all this way, we certainly can't have you returning empty-handed now, can we? And if you don't mind... when you see Her Highness, I'd appreciate it if you could put a good word in."

"Very well. Consider it done, then."

He spared one final, disdainful glance at Radnor before turning away, feeling the strong desire to let out a deep sigh.

“I swear, it’s as if these people aren’t even thinking...” Ludwig rubbed at his temples, nursing the mild headache he’d had since returning to his office at the Golden Moon Ministry. “Why commit such obvious fraud? You’re just going to get caught! You might as well not do it to begin with... If only all the nobles were as wise as Her Highness. This would be so much easier.” He sighed and shook his head. “Well, a man can dream, can’t he?”

“Hey, are those new wrinkles on your face or are you just happy to see me?”

Ludwig looked up with a start to find a man standing in his doorway. He had a rich crop of blond hair with a well-trimmed beard. His brown eyes radiated intelligence, and he had a disarming smile. Ludwig grinned back at the nostalgic sight of the man.

“Ah, Balthazar. It’s been a while. When did you return to the capital?”

“Just arrived this afternoon. I heard you were looking for me, so I came straight here.”

Balthazar Brandt was an old friend of Ludwig’s who worked at the Scarlet Moon Ministry. As the third son of a count, he’d been born into a comfortable life. Regardless, the trappings of luxury had failed to quench the flame of his talent. Seeking to test the extent of his gifts, he came to the capital and studied under the most prestigious scholar in the city. Under this scholar’s tutelage, he not only gained much knowledge but also met Ludwig. Soon after, he took the Scarlet Moon Ministry’s employment exam, passed it, and began making a name for himself as a young but fully capable official.

“I didn’t think I’d be able to meet with you this soon... It looks like fortune has smiled upon me,” said Ludwig as he breathed a sigh of relief.

He hadn’t requested a meeting with Balthazar to reminisce about old times. Though he had the backing of the Princess of Tearmoon, he was nonetheless just a public servant. In his capacity as an official of the Golden Moon Ministry, he’d been very vocal about abolishing policies that unnecessarily favored the nobility, and he put a lot of work into ensuring taxes were collected fairly and equitably. And for nobles like the Baron of Radnor, whose power and obstinacy gave even his peers pause, he’d gone as far as to pay personal visits to them. His efforts often put him in conflict with the factions of the Four Dukes, and he’d earned himself a

reputation among noble circles as a busybody who was a constant thorn in their sides.

That, however, was the extent of his accomplishments. There was a limit to what he could do from within the Golden Moon Ministry, which handled taxes and financial matters. The Empire was too large an entity to be fixed under his power alone. Therefore, he needed friends — comrades who shared his vision and supported his cause.

The two of them made their way to a familiar restaurant and sat down in a private room. Immediately, Balthazar asked, “So, what’s the deal, Ludwig? Did you call me here just to show me your new wrinkles?”

“Would you quit it with the wrinkles? I swear... Still, I won’t deny that I’ve been busy. The fatigue is starting to catch up to me...”

Ludwig fought back a yawn and shrugged.

“I hear you’ve been stepping on a lot of toes recently. Really cracking down on things, aren’t you?”

Balthazar came from a distinguished line of central nobility. It wasn’t surprising that his family had heard some rumors.

“The folks back home have been talking about you, you know...” he continued. “Oh, but don’t get the wrong idea. None of my people are involved in any fraudulent activity.”

“I know.”

The two smiled at each other. Ludwig’s smile was wry, whereas Balthazar’s was sardonic.

“Of course, if you *do* catch them doing anything shady, then feel free to penalize them as you see fit. Don’t go easy on them because of me. Rampant tax fraud can bring a country to its knees. We must always be wary of forces that seek to corrupt the moral fiber of the Empire.”

Balthazar was a thorough rationalist who would spare no mercy for even his own family if faced with their wrongdoing. His absolutism was what Ludwig most admired in him.

“What you say is true, but what concerns me more than tax fraud, honestly, are the discriminatory views that are so firmly entrenched in this Empire...”

“Huh. Discriminative views, you say...”

The drinks they ordered arrived. Balthazar took a sip as he gave Ludwig a look that challenged this claim.

“I’ll grant you that there exists discrimination toward some minority tribes in remote regions, but is it really a big enough problem to be worthy of such concern? Things seem fine to me right now...”

“Would you stop playing dumb already? Look, the truth is, I actually tried proposing this to the Baron of Radnor already. I asked him if he’d be willing to open his land to cultivation. His barony isn’t that big, but it’s flat and it has rivers, making it perfect for growing crops. I even offered him subsidies. Guess how that went?” Ludwig sighed. “It was like talking to a brick wall.”

“Yeah, I’m not surprised,” said Balthazar. He folded his arms and nodded. “I doubt there are a whole lot of nobles who’d willingly turn their domain into farmland.”

The tendency to look down on farmers and agriculture, the low rate of self-sufficiency it caused, and the enormous importation costs that were required to sustain the supply of food... These were the issues that kept Ludwig up at night.

“Unless we solve this problem, I fear the Empire has no future.”

The roots of the problem ran deep, and discrimination toward agriculture in the Empire could be traced all the way back to when it first came to power. The land that the Tearmoon Empire currently occupied was a fertile region once known as the Crescent Belt. A seed sowed there would easily reap ten or even twenty times the reward. The people in the region sustained themselves through farming. With abundant resources and plentiful harvests, they lived easy lives and saw little conflict... Until they were invaded by a foreign tribe of hunter-gatherers. Having repurposed their hunting techniques for war, they quickly subjugated all the native residents of the region. Thenceforth, the conquered were mocked by their new masters, who referred to them as “slaves of the land.” Ridiculed as spineless and inept, they were given labels such as “those without the courage to hunt” and “those with no talent but that of tilling the land.”

After gaining access to a steady source of food and a supply of laborers in the form of their new serfs, the hunter-gatherers grew richer and richer. At some point, they began to refer to themselves as nobles. And the man who was once the brave leader of their tribe became the First Emperor of the Empire. Ever since then, farmers had always occupied a low spot in the social hierarchy of the Empire. Though the archaic system of serfdom had long been

abolished, discrimination remained alive and well, stemming from the deeply-rooted notion that farming was for those who lacked the talent to do anything else.

The result of this was that nowadays, nobles were unwilling to use their land for agriculture. Of course, they allowed for the bare minimum of farming to supply themselves with food, but they much preferred importing and relied on it whenever possible. The last thing they wanted was to turn their existing territory into new farmland.

This was the ultimate irony of Tearmoon — an Empire erected upon vast swathes of fertile land that despised its own blessing. That twisted notion was what Ludwig now stood against. The towering opponent he intended to do battle with was none other than the very history and tradition of the Empire itself.

"In our current state, we're reliant on neighboring kingdoms for food production. That's far too risky. If they ever suffer a famine, those kingdoms will undoubtedly prioritize themselves. Unless we increase our domestic production and improve our rate of self-sufficiency, the Empire has no future."

"What you say is true, but, it is also extremely difficult," said Balthazar, grimacing as he considered the implications.

With the gaze of an angler fishing for a meal, Ludwig leaned forward.

"The reason I wanted to speak to you is to inquire about the state of things out there. Those nobles in the Outlands... How are they doing?"

"Probably exactly as you suspect."

The areas that were, relatively speaking, newly absorbed into the Empire were known as the imperial Outlands. The rulers of those regions were referred to as Outland nobles. Before being incorporated into the Empire, the practice of agriculture there had been perfectly normal, and their people were simple farmers who felt no shame in tilling the land. Once they became a part of Tearmoon, however, they were ridiculed by the central nobility, who saw them as country bumpkins and called them Outland nobles. Those who appreciated this treatment were few and far between.

"As time passes, everyone falls into line and tries to reduce their farmland. The Scarlet Moon Ministry has rules that limit the amount of farmland that can be repurposed... but rules can be *bent*,

so long as there is money."

There was a growing desire among Outland nobles to use their land for purposes other than farming. It wasn't as strong as in the central nobility, but the trend was clear.

"The Outcount of Rudolvon is one of those rare nobles who is determined to maintain his lands for agriculture, but there are very few like him."

Even with imports, balancing supply with demand was always like walking a tightrope, and the rope was getting thinner by the day. The gradual decline in crop production, while not yet fatal, was undeniably pernicious. Ludwig couldn't help but see it as a slow poison that, drop by drop, was being fed into the mouth of an unsuspecting Empire.

"On that note, what about our dear Princess, who you never stop talking about? Does Her Sagely Highness have a good understanding of the problems we're dealing with?"

Ludwig, who until moments before had been steeping in a quagmire of his own pessimism, perked up at the mention of Mia. The situation might have seemed hopeless... but it wasn't. He knew where hope lay.

"Yesterday, I received a letter from Her Highness. It was the first one she'd sent since leaving for the academy..." He broke into a knowing smile. "In it, she mentioned attending her first meet-and-greet party. Where do you think it was held?"

"Do tell."

"Perujin Agricultural Country."

Balthazar drew a breath. There was a hint of awe in his widened eyes.

"Now *that*... is interesting."

Perujin Agricultural Country bordered Tearmoon to the southwest. With farmers comprising eighty percent of its population, though it was fairly large in size, its military and economic power paled in comparison to the Empire. As a result, in the eyes of Tearmoon, it was regarded as a minor country barely worthy of consideration. Mentions of Perujin were frequently accompanied by such remarks as "second-rate," "a country of serfs," and "undeveloped and uncivilized..."

Sadly, the prejudice of these gossipy nobles blinded them to the truth. A significant portion of the food consumed by their proud Empire was imported from the country they so disdained. In

choosing derision and ignorance over blatant facts, they effectively proved how gravely they suffered from this disease of thoughtlessness.

"A country that's dismissed by nobles but is actually of great importance to the Empire, huh... If this was a diplomatic move backed by insight, then the implications are... By god."

"This is Her Highness we're talking about, you know? Chances are it was all calculated. And there's still more to the letter. Guess what came next?"

"Listen well, Rania. I've said this once and I'll say it again. Make absolutely sure there is no discourtesy done to the guests from the Empire."

"Yes, I'll make sure of that, Father."

The Third Princess of Perujin Agricultural Country, Rania Tafrif Perugian, gave a rote answer, hiding her reluctance behind the delicate veil that covered her face.

"Again, I must emphasize the importance of the Empire for our industries—"

"Do not worry, Father. I will ensure that everything proceeds smoothly," said Rania, cutting her father off. She didn't need to hear the rest. He'd been saying the same thing for years, ever since she first attended Saint-Noel.

Not that it matters. It's not like anyone worthwhile is going to show up from the Empire, she thought. She didn't talk back to him, but she mouthed this argument silently.

She hadn't always been like this. Since childhood she'd had a strong sense of responsibility. As a princess of Perujin, she saw it as her duty to shoulder the future of her country. With that in mind, she'd enrolled at Saint-Noel Academy.

Every year in the early spring, the academy's Perugian students would host a meet-and-greet, to which they'd invite the Tearmoon students for the purposes of fostering communication and — more importantly — treating the young nobles to food and crops produced in Perujin. Those Tearmoon students would all eventually inherit their parents' titles and occupy important positions within the Empire. Getting on friendly terms with them early on would benefit Perujin in the future, which was exactly what the party was for.

When Rania first began her schooling, she put her heart and

soul into the preparations for this party, truly believing it was in the best interests of her country. She procured the choicest harvests, sought advice for suitable recipes, and spent many late nights planning with her friends, all so that they could provide their Tearmoon guests with the best experience possible. When the day came, however, reality betrayed her. Only a handful of students showed up, the families of whom were all lower-ranked nobles. They all wore the same listless expression that suggested forced participation, and it was immediately clear that none of them wanted to be there.

At first, Rania couldn't comprehend the jarring disparity in attitude. Why had they received such an apathetic group of visitors? The answer came from — of all people — her own older sister.

A country of serfs. Second-rate. Tributary.

These were the terms used by Tearmoon nobles to describe Perujin. She learned that her sister had done the same thing years before, enduring the same humiliation to humor groups of reluctant Tearmoon guests. The weary smile her sister wore as she recounted these experiences made Rania shake with indignation, but all she could do was clench her teeth, make a tight fist, and swallow her anger.

Because she knew the truth: for the weak, the only choice was to endure. If relations with Tearmoon soured and war erupted, Perujin would be crushed like an ant. Ever since that day, she'd lost all passion.

And now, with the annual meet-and-greet fast approaching, her mood had hit rock bottom. Just thinking about it made her want to retch. Her reluctance was entirely within reason; nobody looked forward to having the fruits of their painstaking labor mocked as cheap country food.

"Ugh, I *hate* this. I wish the party would just get canceled..."

With that, an idea came to her.

"...It's all a farce anyway. Might as well have some fun."

She decided to play a prank. She went to the platters of food that were being prepared for the party... and secretly added in some preserved food that had gone stale long since.

With agriculture being its primary industry, Perujin invested heavily in researching techniques to preserve grains, allowing them to keep for much longer. Though flavor did suffer, it was a small difference that only the most discerning tongues noticed.

Considering the fact that Tearmoon had sent nothing but second-tier nobles, there was no way they could ever tell the difference. Rania smiled as she imagined watching the clueless dolts gleefully eating a bunch of stale food. It'd be small comfort, but at least she'd get a kick out of it. Alas, in what was perhaps karmic punishment for her spiteful heart, her mischief ultimately came back to haunt her.

"Princess Rania, please accept my sincerest gratitude for inviting us to such a wonderful party filled with so many splendid exhibits."

When the guests arrived on the day of the party, Rania's jaw hit the floor.

Wh-Wh-Wha— Why?! How?!

"I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire. It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Leading the group of students was none other than the VIP of VIPs, dear daughter of the reigning Emperor, Princess Mia herself!

Okay, deep breaths! Deeeeep breaths! Calm down, Rania, she thought, trying not to panic.

"The pleasure is all mine, Your Highness. I am Rania Tafrif Perujin, Third Princess of Perujin Agricultural Country. Thank you very much for coming to our party. Please make yourselves at home and enjoy these delicious Perujin treats," she said, bowing deeply. When she looked up, however, her breath caught in her throat.

Princess Mia, with her deep blue eyes and crystalline gaze, was looking her straight in the face.

"Hyaa— Ah, um, Y-Your Highness...?"

"Eh? Oh, I'm sorry. Don't mind me."

Mia's placid tone failed to calm Rania's fluttering heart.

It... It was like she saw straight through me...

Then Rania remembered. Mia Luna Tearmoon had another title; there were those who referred to her as the Great Sage of the Empire.

Did she see straight through my prank too...? N-No, that can't be. She can't possibly know. There are plenty of snacks and sweets, and it's totally possible she won't get around to eating that one. I should be fine, she thought as she ran her gaze across the variety of platters that covered the tables. There were so many — almost as many as the butterflies fluttering nervously in her stomach.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Don’t mind me.”

After spending a long second staring at Rania’s face, Mia shook her head. The girl had a healthy tan, and there was a charming beauty to her features. Her dark hair had soaked in the color of the night sky, and her eyes glowed with the deep green of a lush summer forest.

Ah, right. I do remember her features being something like this. Now that I’ve gotten a good look though, I won’t forget again! she thought, feeling a sense of satisfaction after fully taking in the details of the girl’s face.

Her thoughts wandered to a memory from the previous timeline. It was the year the Empire was struck by a terrible famine. At the time, Ludwig had been working round the clock trying to procure enough food for the empire.

“Your Highness... if I may be so bold as to speak frankly about my frustrations...” said past-Ludwig. A vein throbbed in his temple and his cheek twitched.

“A-Actually, you may not...” Mia stammered. Ludwig’s expression gave her the shivers.

“We were going to speak to the princess of a country whose help we are in dire need of, correct? And the princess attended the academy at the same time you did, correct? So how, then, is it possible that you *don’t remember what she looks like*?”

“I *just said* ‘you may not’!”

Ludwig paid no attention to this feeble protest and continued.

“The reason nobles send their sons and daughters to Saint-Noel Academy is to build relations and facilitate diplomacy. I trust you are aware of this very basic fact?”

“O-Of course I am... I do, um, feel sorry for what happened...”

What had happened was entirely the result of Mia’s own blunder. After a series of difficult talks, Ludwig had finally managed to convince Perujin Agricultural Country to sell them food. They’d gotten as far as sitting down at the discussion table, but when the Perujin princess arrived, Mia went and said something that sent everything crashing down into fiery disaster. She looked at the princess and asked... “My, who might you be?”

Ludwig regarded Mia, who in a rare moment of honest remorse looked truly crestfallen. He sighed.

“Well, then again, they were probably waiting for us to slip up so they could use it as an excuse to turn us down, anyway.”

Mia looked at him, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Really?"

"I imagine so. The Empire isn't the only place suffering from famine. Harvests were bad in all the surrounding kingdoms as well. Food is in short supply everywhere. I doubt anyone has enough to export. Even though they'd agreed to talk, it's likely that they were looking for an excuse to turn us away the whole time."

In an equally rare moment of sympathy, Ludwig had spared her some words of comfort. Immediately following that, though...

"With that said, it is nevertheless inexcusable to be forgetting the faces of foreign royalty and powerful nobles, especially when you've doubtless seen them many times before. You'd better take a good, hard look at yourself and reflect on your mistakes, Your Highness."

"I-I am already. You don't have to keep telling me..."

In the end, Mia spent the rest of the day choking back tears as she was forced to endure the relentless lecturing of a very unhappy Ludwig. Ever since that day, Mia had been making an honest effort to figure out which people were important contacts and trying her hardest to remember their faces.

...Which was good, of course, but not really anything to go bragging about.

"It is my honest wish that this wonderful gathering will bring the people of Tearmoon and Perujin closer. Now, let the party begin!"

At Rania's prompting, the party did, indeed, begin. It was neither a buffet-style party nor a classic tea party, but something in between. The food laid on the tables was mostly snacks and fruits. The drinks consisted of various kinds of black and herbal tea. The whole of the party effused the calm elegance of an afternoon break. As Mia scanned the available delicacies, she felt her eyes being pulled toward the cakes, and then the tarts, and then the...

What a selection. Agricultural Country indeed. They sure earn their name.

Mia was honestly impressed, and the sons and daughters of marquesses and counts who accompanied her voiced their glee at the great variety of foods as well. For the girls especially, their prejudices melted in the face of such appetizing sweets. Nothing fought discrimination like a good pastry. Granted, the fact that Mia

personally rushed to begin the tasting tour was an indispensable factor in their acceptance.

Just to be clear, that was *not* Mia's intention. The only thing going through her head at the time was the urge to stuff her face. An obvious fact, perhaps, but still worth mentioning.

After making the rounds of the tables, Mia found her gaze drawn to one particular plate off to the side.

"My? Those cookies look..."

There was nothing exceptional about the cookies. Amidst a sea of colorful fruits and dazzling pastries, the only thing that stuck out about them was, in fact, their sheer plainness.

"Ah, wait, that's—"

For some reason, Rania was dashing toward her with a look of panic. She wasn't sure why, but she could find out later. For now, the cookies were more important. She picked one up and popped it into her mouth.

Ahh, I know this... This is it. This is the taste.

Within the powdery crumbliness was a sweetness that slowly spread across her tongue. The cheap sugary taste immediately brought back her long, dreary days in the dungeon. In a sea of gray, depressing memories, this was one of the few bright spots.

Just once, Anne had brought her these cookies. Before the revolution began, the Empire had already been experiencing a food shortage, and even the meals for the royal family could not escape austerity. For weeks at a time, there was often nothing sweet for Mia to eat. After she was imprisoned in the dungeon, the quality of her food only worsened. Just when she'd nearly forgotten there was any enjoyment to be had in eating, Anne came to her with these cookies. When she'd tasted their sweetness... The bliss was beyond words.

A flood of emotions came rushing back as she relived this moment, and she teared up.

"This taste... How long it's been..."

"I-I'm terribly sorry, Your Highness!"

She turned to find Rania staring at her with a look of sheer terror.

"Uhh... For what?"

She wasn't sure what had happened, but judging from how the color had completely drained from the girl's face, she figured it was something serious. Just in case, she brought Rania, and some

cookies — one does not, after all, eat only a single cookie — to a quiet part of the party hall where they'd have some privacy. Whatever was wrong, she could hopefully smooth things out herself. If word got out and her retinue made a big fuss, they might ruin relations with Perujin entirely. The last thing she wanted was to go back and have Ludwig give her an earful like last time.

In her desire to avoid getting scolded, she'd actually done something pretty tactful.

"About those cookies, um... You see, the truth is that... they were actually made three years ago..."

"Th-Three years ago?!"

Mia stared at the girl in disbelief. In response, Rania's face turned even paler.

"U-Um, it's— I didn't, but— I mean... I'm sorry, it was just a silly prank..."

The Perujin princess was visibly shaking as she apologized, but it failed to move Mia. In fact, Mia wasn't paying any attention at all. She was still stunned from learning the truth of the cookies.

They were made three years ago, and they're still edible?! Not just edible, but still delicious?!

Mia had seen famine — and felt it. The world without food was a hellscape she'd experienced firsthand. The rancid taste of stiff rye bread was something she wouldn't soon forget. In Tearmoon, where agricultural techniques were severely underdeveloped, methods of food preservation were almost unheard of. It was nearly impossible to keep crops edible for long, never mind maintain their quality.

Mia held up the cookies, regarding them with awe. The fact that they even existed was incredible. She knew their significance. For a moment, they almost looked like golden coins. Then, everything suddenly clicked into place and she understood why Rania had brought these cookies here.

I see now! This is a demonstration of Perujin technology! She's showing me how good they are at preserving food!

The Tearmoon Empire was effectively Perujin's customer. The food used for this party was not simply meant to be enjoyed. They were samples of products that were for sale.

...Or something. I remember Ludwig saying something to that effect. Probably.

He'd lectured her for so long that she'd ignored most of what he'd said. Regardless...

In that case... Hmhm. This Princess Rania person really knows what she's doing!

Mia gulped as she eyed the golden treasures she held in her hand. In a soft voice, she mused, "I see... So this is Perujin food preservation... Absolutely incredible."

Rania's eyes snapped open at Mia's words. She stared at the Tearmoon princess, barely able to process what she heard. She'd thought for sure she was in for a vicious scolding... but what she was hearing was praise.

A Princess of Tearmoon... is praising Perujin technology? How? Why?

In the world as she knew it, people from the Empire had nothing but ridicule and contempt for them. All the hard work and expertise that went into the crops they grew and stored would never be acknowledged. She'd given up hope. But now...

This person... Could it be? Is Princess Mia someone who will recognize the value of our technology and treat us as equals?

"Princess Rania, I wish to discuss something with you. May I have a moment of your time?"

"A-Ah, yes, of course!"

After speaking, the two princesses shared a firm handshake, and thus a miraculous partnership was born through profound and mutual misunderstanding. As for where this peculiar project will take them... Well, only time will tell.

"Perujin food preservation, huh... By establishing a collaborative research project, we gain insight into their technology while they gain access to funding. But didn't you say the Empire was suffering from a bad case of empty coffer syndrome?"

"I'd set aside some of our budget to assist with cultivating new farmland. Most of that hasn't been touched yet, so I was thinking I'd use it to fund this project. Seems like a better use of both money and time than trying to talk sense into those thick noble skulls."

"Hmm... Food preservation lets you get your foot in the door, after which you can expand to more generalized agricultural techniques. Then, with tangible examples of the benefits these technologies bring about, you can start to reshape the mindset nobles have toward agriculture. After that, it'll be far easier to convince them to clear more land for farming... Hah. Brilliant. I see

you've really thought this through."

"As a matter of fact, I sometimes find myself wishing we *would* have a famine. It'd save me a lot of effort convincing them, at least."

"Whoa, okay, slow down there," Balthazar said with his hands up. "I think you might be cutting off your nose to spite your face a bit with that wish."

Ludwig laughed.

"Point taken. I'm joking, of course... But what do you think? After hearing all this, how does the future of the Empire look to you? It doesn't exactly fill one with optimism, but if you ask me... There's no need to be overly pessimistic either."

"Hmm. If what you say is true, then I do agree that this princess is one intriguing person..."

Balthazar held up his mug of ale.

"To the wise princess who appeared, like magic, before my good friend."

Ludwig did not mirror the gesture. Instead, he peered through his spectacles and, in a solemn voice, said, "To Her Sagely Majesty, the future Empress of Tearmoon."

For a long moment, Balthazar only stared in stunned silence.

"...Are you serious?"

"It's all for the sake of restoring the Empire. To that end, I intend to enlist your help as well," Ludwig said, looking straight into Balthazar's eyes.

For a while, Balthazar held his friend's gaze. Then he looked up at the ceiling, ran his hand through his hair, and let out a short laugh.

"The first Empress in the history of Tearmoon, huh. We're going to have to pull strings until our arms fall off."

Meanwhile, Mia was completely oblivious to the powerful undercurrents that were swirling beneath her. While she would eventually go on to learn of their plans and suffer a minor meltdown as a result, that is a story best saved for later.

Mia's Diary

The Seventeenth Day of the Fifth Month

I had ambermoon tomato stew and cake today. The ambermoon tomato was yucky. But the cake was yummy.

The Tenth Day of the Sixth Month

I had bread with roasted moonbow pheasant. It was pretty good. But not bringing me any dessert was unforgivable.

The Twenty-Fifth Day of the Sixth Month

I had stellar salmon à la meunière with jelly for dessert. I knew the fish would be yucky. But the jelly was yummy.

The Fourth Day of the Seventh Month

This is my first entry since being reincarnated. Starting today, I've decided to begin writing in this diary again.

Speaking of which, I just read through some of the older entries, and past-me only ever wrote about food. What a silly little girl past-me was. Good thing I'm smart and mature now, so I'm going to be writing serious entries only going forward!

The first thing that happened after my reincarnation was that I had some ambermoon tomato stew. Now, let me tell you. I couldn't believe how good it tasted. The way the tomatoes melted in my mouth and how there was just the right amount of bitterness mixed into the savoriness... Wait, I'm writing about food again.

Phew, that was close. All right, let's start this over. Allow me to describe what has happened to me up until today.

That day, the last thing I remembered was losing my life to the guillotine, and when I woke up, I found myself in my bed. Not only that, but I had reverted to how I'd looked as a child. Even someone as calm and collected as me couldn't help but feel a little bewildered by this turn of events, but I soon figured out what was going on. Basically, being the wise person that I am, God in all His Greatness saw fit to make me the chosen one. I know this to be true.

I have been given a monumental mission. To put it simply, it is my duty to save the Empire.

So I, the Chosen Savior, rose to the challenge. In order to save countless citizens and soldiers who were depending on me, I started to think.

To aid me in my mission, my most loyal subject, Anne, was sent to me. Like a winged envoy of the heavens, she flew through the air and appeared before me. I was a little annoyed when she ruined my cake, but I forgave her immediately. In the previous timeline, she was really good to me until the very end. I am extremely happy to have been granted the chance to repay her loyalty like this, and I feel much safer with her by my side.

I made her my personal maid-in-waiting right away.

Then, I holed up in the library and looked things up. After all, I might be wise, but that doesn't mean I know everything there is to know, right? Besides, admitting there are things you *don't* know is a sign of wisdom. I read a lot of complicated reference books. They're those big, thick things scholars read, you know? Of course, for someone like me, it was easy-peasy. Not even worth bragging about.

With the knowledge I gained from those books, along with a tiny bit of what I'd heard from Ludwig before... Just so we're clear, it was really just the tiniest little bit, okay? Anyway, I analyzed all that information to figure out what was wrong with the Empire. And I did it all by myself. Because I am really smart.

And now, today! That's right, today was a special day! It was the best of days.

In order to find someone to help me do the work that needs to be done, I went to the Golden Moon Ministry. When I got there, that stupid four— I mean, Ludwig was about to get kicked to the countryside. So I swooped in, told them all off, and saved the day. And then guess what he did? Ludwig, that stupid four-eyes who annoys me to no end, actually came over and praised me!

When he heard the conclusions I'd drawn from my analysis, his eyes went, like, really wide, and he stared at me. Then, he got on his knees and said all sorts of good things about me.

That was amazing. It felt so good that for a moment I thought *that* might actually be why I got reincarnated in the first place, just

so I could go there and experience that moment.

Then he said he wanted to swear loyalty to me, so, of course, I let him.

He says really rude things sometimes, but in the previous timeline, he worked really hard for the Empire. Out of respect for his dedication back then, I let him off the hook. Even though he's annoying and rude and I sometimes can't stand him. I forgive him because I'm very merciful.

At this rate, for someone as smart as me, saving the Empire from ruin should be a total cinch.

Also, I'm on a roll right now. Look at all this fine writing I've done. Maybe I'm a natural? I should think about writing some more literature.

Afterword

To new readers, greetings. To old readers, welcome back. I am Nozomu Mochitsuki.

This story — *Tearmoon Empire* — was serialized on two self-publishing sites. On the first site, though it didn't make much of a splash, there were a handful of readers who stayed with it for a long time and continued to offer their steadfast support. On the second site, readers continued to leave passionate comments and support the story, which eventually led to its publication. Thank you very much. I am glad that this book has found its way into your hands.

Now, it seems that the second volume will be published as well. Rather than have the author drone on and on about it, let's have the main character, Princess Mia, tell us her thoughts instead.

Here we go!

Mia: "Greetings. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, Princess of the Tearmoon Empire!"

Mochitsuki: "Good afternoon, Princess Mia. Is your cold better now?"

Mia: "Yes, I am in perfect health now. Thank you for your concern. I remember that stupid four— Ludwig telling me a long time ago that I can't catch colds, but what now, huh? Looks like he was wrong! Hah! I'll have him know that I'm more delicate than he thinks."

Mochitsuki: "...I see. Well, that's great! Now, would you like to tell us your thoughts about the second volume?"

Mia: "Of course. In the second volume, being the wise person that I am, I'll have a big part to play. Summer vacation begins, and I head back to the Empire. Then, I march into the lair of evil that my archnemesis, Tiona, calls home..."

Mochitsuki: "Uh, lair of evil might be a little... Also, aren't you forgetting the incident in the forest?"

Mia: "The incident in the forest? Whatever do you mean?"

Mochitsuki: "Remember the whole thing with that cursed box?

And how you met that familiar person again...”

Mia: “Cursed box? Person... Ugh, my head... And my hand is... shaking? My stomach hurts a little too... H-How odd. What in the moons happened?”

And so, may you look forward to the adventures of Mia the Delicate and Chicken-Hearted as she has an upsetting experience in a forest, visits Tiona at home, and gets swept up by the flames of a simmering revolution. There will be plenty of exciting events to keep the princess busy!

I hope to see you there.

That done, I’d like to offer a few words of thanks.

To the illustrator, Gilse, thank you for the wonderful illustrations. You have my gratitude for bringing Mia to life in such an adorable way through your drawings.

To the editor, F, thank you for looking into this work and getting in touch with me. You have been a great help throughout this process.

To my family, thank you for your unending support.

And to the readers who chose this book, thank you very much. It is my sincere wish that you have been entertained by Mia’s shenanigans. Let us meet again.

Bonus Short Story: Princess Mia… Sows the Seeds (Literally)

"Mr. Ludwig, you have a delivery from Her Highness."

"Ah, thank you."

Ludwig glanced at the package from Mia and frowned.

This month, too?

Ever since Mia had gone to Saint-Noel Academy, she'd been sending back large sums of money on a monthly basis. So far, it totalled almost half of what she'd received as living expenses. There were never any instructions included with the money she sent, so Ludwig took it to mean that she trusted him to put it to good use. He appreciated it; it was never a bad thing to have some extra cash. While it came from taxing the people and therefore wasn't making the Empire any richer, it wasn't tied up by the budget and he could use it however he wished. From providing relief for impoverished areas to bolstering the treasury of the hospital built in Mia's name, there was no shortage of places that needed money.

"Never does a day go by when I'm not deeply grateful for Princess Mia's care and consideration… but are we sure this is okay?"

He couldn't help but wonder. Sure, so long as she was in Saint-Noel, she would never lack for basic necessities. Meals were prepared by the dormitory, so unless she wished to head to town and dine out, there was no need for food money. She already had a room to live in, and teaching materials were all provided by the academy. In terms of simple day-to-day living, there was absolutely no need to spend money in Saint-Noel.

However, Mia was a princess, and there was the issue of image. How she was viewed directly affected the reputation of the Empire. If her lifestyle were to be seen as shabby or unseemly, it would be a disgrace for all of Tearmoon. Therefore, it was necessary for her to host the occasional tea party and invite the princesses from the other kingdoms. She also needed to actively participate in evening

balls. The cost of attending events like these might as well be considered foreign diplomacy expenses, and therefore was required spending. It shouldn't normally be possible to save this much money...

"But, I mean, this is Princess Mia we're talking about. I'm sure she's done the calculations and has it all planned out somehow..."

Meanwhile, in a profound betrayal of Ludwig's expectations, Mia was busy saving like a true miser.

"I can't afford to waste any money!"

Without asking, her father — the Emperor — kept sending her tons of money, so she kept diverting considerable portions of it to Ludwig. As for the small amount she held onto, she tried her hardest to avoid spending any of that as well. Oftentimes, in a display of frugality entirely unbefitting her status, her mind would be occupied by thoughts such as *I wonder if I can survive all next month on the money from this month?*

Day after day, Mia wracked her brains trying to figure out ways to save money without damaging the Empire's reputation, perpetually walking that fine line between frugality and humiliation. It was a feat impossible for mere commoners like Anne. Only true masters like the Great Sage of the Empire had the skill and wisdom to find that delicate balance.

The latest event to trouble Mia was the very thing Ludwig had himself considered: a tea party between princesses. For parties like these, it was obviously expected that the host would foot the whole bill. From purchasing expensive teas to preparing tantalizing snacks, all the expenses were the host's responsibility. Guests, of course, had to bring small gifts as well, but those were cheap enough that she didn't mind doing that while attending the soirees of others. In fact, she eagerly accepted invitations to parties and was perfectly happy to bring a present with her. She couldn't soley go to other people's parties, though. At some point, she had to host an elaborate tea party of her own to display the wealth and power of the Empire to her peers. And therein lay the problem...

"What should I do..."

That day, Mia was rolling around in bed and idly scanning the notes Anne had left for her. She flipped onto her stomach, kicking at the bed and scowling at the note.

"I honestly have no idea what I should do about this..."

Scribbled across the paper were the costs involved in the tea party she'd attended the other day, with Anne's help, they'd calculated and written them down. During the party, she'd gone around asking things like, "This tea is wonderful. What kind of leaves did you use?" and "These sweets are delicious. I'd like to have my father send me some later. Where did you order them from?" to inconspicuously extract information. When she tallied all the costs up...

"This is almost three-quarters of my monthly allowance... Isn't this a little too much to be spending on reputation alone?"

Being the princess of a very wealthy empire, a tea party that chewed through three-quarters of her monthly allowance in one go was nothing to sneeze at. That kind of spending was definitely excessive. She'd been surprised to learn that such parties were not uncommon in the academy. Slowly, it dawned on her that tea parties in Saint-Noel were not mere entertainment... They were battlefields where the pride and prestige of various kingdoms clashed. Hidden behind the delicate smiles of princesses and the daughters of nobles were egos honed to a razor-sharp point, which they wielded with deadly skill in an invisible melee of power, wealth, and fame. What would happen if Mia were to join the fray?

All that money I worked so hard to save is going to disappear in the blink of an eye!

The most dire casualty would undoubtedly be her wallet. For example, suppose Mia used a whole month's worth of her allowance to host a tea party. In that case, one of her princess guests who was too competitive for her own good would probably try to outdo her and host another one that cost two months' allowance. After that, in order to maintain the Empire's image, Mia would have to up the ante even more.

There'd be no end to it.

Spurred on by the unchecked egos of princesses, there would be rampant inflation of expenditures. Ultimately, it would be the same as an arms race, except instead of the number of warhorses or experienced soldiers, it would be the quality of utensils and cost of tea leaves and sweets.

"I need to uphold the Empire's reputation while distancing myself from such pointless competition. Hmm... This will require some sort of paradigm shift, but how..." she muttered to herself, still in bed.

Just then, Anne appeared at the door.

"Excuse me, milady. A messenger from Miss Rafina has arrived with an invitation to her tea party."

"From Miss Rafina, you say..." answered Mia glancing listlessly in Anne's direction.

Tea with Rafina was not something Mia was looking forward to, but all things considered, it was also not an invitation she could easily refuse.

"So be it. Into enemy territory I go, then. I'll consider it reconnaissance," she said, figuring she might as well make use of the opportunity. She'd been thinking about tea parties, after all, and the offer tickled her curiosity. With her mind made up, she lazily wiggled out of her clothes and changed into a dress. The fact that she'd been in her pajamas until noon was a secret known only to Anne.

"Welcome, Princess Mia. By the way, do you mind if I just called you Mia?"

"Oh, not at all. Call me whatever you want!" said Mia with a slightly overenthusiastic smile.

The tea party took place in a garden on the outskirts of the school grounds. Commonly referred to as the Secret Garden, it was said to be accessible only to those who were invited by Rafina. Ever since she first attended Saint-Noel in the previous timeline, Mia had wanted to come take a look, but this was the first time she had ever set foot inside. As soon as she entered, a floral aroma filled her nose.

What a wonderful place. Even the Whitemoon Palace back home doesn't have a garden like this, she thought, enchanted by the sweet smell that surrounded her.

Pinkish-red flowers filled her view. Known as "princess roses," they were a rare breed that had a strong, elegant fragrance and were notoriously difficult to grow.

"What do you think? Do you like them?"

Sitting at a table in the center of the garden was Rafina, her smile every bit as lovely as the flowers around her. Mia turned toward her and curtsied.

"I'm terribly honored to have been invited to this tea party, Rafina," said Mia, smiling back. As she looked around, however, the smile froze on her face. "Um... Where might the other guests be?"

“You’re my only guest today, Mia.”

“...Huh?”

Her lips quivered a little, and she felt cold sweat begin to drip down her back. Trying very hard to maintain her smile, she asked, “I-I’m the only one?”

“Yes. We just became friends the other day, didn’t we? I’ve been meaning to sit down with you ever since. Now that you’re here today, we can have a good talk and really get to know one another.”

Rafina continued to smile, striking absolute terror into the core of Mia’s chicken-hearted soul.

After Mia had settled nervously into her seat, a maid appeared with their tea.

“Is Miss Anne not with you today?”

“O-Oh, um, no, because I thought there would be other people here.”

In general, she didn’t bring Anne to tea parties. The one time she’d done so, the noble girl who’d hosted the party had spent the whole afternoon staring at Anne in a way that constantly reminded her that she didn’t belong. Rafina’s expression turned solemn, and she gave an understanding nod.

“I see. I apologize for not making that clear earlier. It’s certainly true that no one appreciates having someone they trust being treated with hostility.” Then she smiled again and continued, her voice growing melodious with excitement. “But this means I have you all to myself, Mia. Oh, there’s so much to talk about. This is going to be so much fun.”

M-M-Moons have mercy! Alone? With her*? I might as well serve her my head on a silver platter!*

She swallowed in an attempt to contain her panic. As she forced herself to keep faking a smile, her gaze fell on the table before her where a teacup rested.

Hm, this cup... was made in Belluga. And it wasn’t cheap, either.

There was a glimmer in her eye. She’d remembered her mission. It was reconnaissance time. Next, she turned her attention toward the tea in the cup, only to pause at its color.

It’s... pink?

“I do hope it will suit your tastes...” said Rafina, gesturing for her to give it a try.

She brought the cup to her lips and took a sip. A pleasant warmth filled the inside of her mouth and rose up through her nose, bringing with it a pleasing aroma that mixed the freshness of herbs with the sweetness of flowers.

"My... This is delicious."

Before she knew it, the words had slipped from her mouth. Her honest compliment made Rafina beam.

"That's wonderful to hear."

"It has such an unusual fragrance. What kind of tea leaves did you use to make this?"

Upon hearing her question, Rafina's lips curled into a knowing grin.

"It's an original herbal tea made from a blend of herbs and flowers. In fact, you might find one of the aromas in the blend rather familiar..." she said as she looked around.

As Mia followed her line of sight around the garden, it suddenly occurred to her.

"The smell of flowers... Was it... the ones in this garden?"

"Correct. You're very good with smells, Mia." Rafina giggled before gently cradling one of the flowers in her hands. "These little darlings are mine, actually. I've been tending to them myself."

"My, is that so? I didn't know gardening was a hobby of yours, Miss Rafina."

"It most certainly is. Not just flowers, either. I'm growing all sorts of herbs and even some fruits. Whenever I host a tea party, I bring them for my guests."

"I see, you tend them personally..."

Just then, Mia had a flash of divine inspiration.

Th-That's it! If Miss Rafina has an interest in gardening, then I just have to show an interest too!

The act of treating guests to teas infused with flowers that one had grown oneself could arguably be seen as forcing one's interests on others. In Rafina's case, it was fine because her products were of high enough quality to be considered a treat for her guests. It was entirely possible, however, for someone else to serve tea infused with herbs of questionable quality or produce a cake made with malformed fruits. In those cases, it would hardly be a treat for the guests. If that someone else was her, however...

Though it would be a display of supreme arrogance, it would not damage the reputation of Tearmoon. If anything, it would be an

attitude befitting the princess of a powerful empire.

They'll probably call me egotistical, but at least they won't call me stingy. What a brilliant idea, if I do say so myself!

"The fruits, I can preserve with sugar and use in cakes. I sometimes squeeze the juice out instead and serve the dry meaty portion with tea. All in all, I just enjoy growing and taking care of plants."

"What a wonderful hobby you have," said Mia, nodding along with a smile that showed a little too much tooth to be entirely sincere.

The next day, Mia started looking into herbs right away. Fortunately, Saint-Noel was home to the largest collection of knowledge on the continent. There was an abundance of books about botany, and she found the ones she needed immediately. With this information at her fingertips, she flipped a book open and delved into its pages. She learned about herbs and flowers used in teas as well as fruits used in cakes, but that was not all. From edible grasses to tasty fungi, the books were filled with all sorts of valuable information.

"There's so much to this, and it's all so fascinating..." she mused some time later.

When she'd been on the run from the revolutionary army, hunger had been a constant source of suffering. Being able to forage for food in the forest would have been a godsend.

"I thought about trying to catch fish or hunt hares, but I figured it was all too hard. It never occured to me to consider wild grasses, though..."

The face of the head chef in the capital city appeared in her mind.

"Perhaps I'll pay him a visit when I go back for the summer... He was very good at cooking ambermoon tomatoes, so maybe he'll know how to make wild grasses taste good as well."

As she kept reading, she happened upon a piece of information that impressed her even more.

"Indefinite propagation of sickle moon radishes?! If something like this was possible, then wouldn't it solve all famine for good? I definitely need to look into this!"

"Hm... It should be somewhere around here..."

Three days later, under orders from Mia, Anne made her way into town. The island on which the academy stood was home to all sorts of people and businesses, but everything revolved around Saint-Noel. Stores and stalls existed primarily to serve the needs of students, with only a small subset for academy staff and the store owners themselves. The academy was at the center of every local industry, making the whole island effectively a college town. The island was, therefore, devoid of the kind of people who might be referred to as farmers. Vegetables and fruits were all ferried in from the outside, so there was no need for any local agriculture. However, gardening was a surprisingly popular hobby amongst nobles. The academy even had a gardening club, and there was never any shortage of noble girls eager to profess their love for flowers. With demand came supply, so naturally, the island was home to many stores that sold gardening supplies. They happened to be concentrated in the western district of the town, which was where Anne was headed now.

"I guess Mia decided to take up gardening as a hobby," she mused as she remembered the way Mia excitedly recounted the events of her tea party with Rafina the other day.

It was such a wonderful garden. She said she'd love to have you over as well, so let's go together next time!

"She had such a wide smile on her face." Anne giggled quietly to herself. "Miss Rafina must have rubbed off on her."

As the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia was wise beyond her years. The insight and intelligence she displayed rivalled — no, far surpassed — that of most adults. The thought of Mia, wisdom incarnate as she was, acting like any other girl her age and being influenced by a big sister she looked up to brought a fond smile to Anne's face.

"Hm, let's see. These are princess roses, and these are herbs I think. Also... hm?"

She cocked a brow as she regarded the note Mia had handed her.

"Huh... I'm pretty sure this is that thing mom grows at home. I remember eating this..."

The kind of gardening that Anne imagined nobles would partake in involved beautiful flowers, fragrant herbs, and an overall air of elegance. She envisioned a refined hobby that was more art than activity. Mia's list, meanwhile, was quite grounded. It

consisted mostly of vegetables. And not just any vegetables; these were hardcore produce — the kind that farmers grew en masse. They were so grounded she could almost smell the soil on them. Demand for such things was so low that Anne wasn't sure if she'd even be able to find them in the store.

"And what's this? A single sickle moon radish? And what's this ceramic-looking thing? Seems like some sort of plate..."

For a moment, scenes of her mother chopping the leafy end of the radish off and soaking it in water resurfaced in her mind. She remembered how her mother used to wait for the leaves to grow back and use them for cooking. It was a little life hack they'd learned from Anne's grandmother.

"Haha, as if. The Great Sage of the Empire wouldn't resort to granny wisdom."

Little did she know that her hunch was dead on.

"There's probably something she needs these for... Something wise and very important..."

Not in her wildest dreams would she have thought that the Great Princess Mia had found a solution to the Empire's mortal woes using exactly that — granny wisdom.

"Milady, the things you ordered have arrived."

"Thank you, Anne. Let's go then."

All the students in Saint-Noel who took part in gardening had small gardens reserved for their use. They were in a pleasant corner of the courtyard that received a generous amount of sunshine.

Dressed in dirt-resistant gardening wear that consisted of a short-sleeved blouse and shorts, Mia eagerly made her way outside. Anne had already laid the equipment she'd ordered out in a row. There was a shovel, a watering pot, pruning shears — all of which were brand new — as well as a variety of seeds.

"I'm sorry, but I couldn't find any vegetable seeds in town, and it's pretty expensive to import them."

"I see. I figured as much," said Mia with a nod.

Being able to grow vegetables on her own would have allowed her to use them during not only tea parties but lunch parties as well, so the news was a tad disappointing. She wasn't too frustrated, though. Even she hadn't expected it to be easy to grow vegetables. Her true objective was...

"By the way, Anne, did you manage to find a sickle moon

radish?"

"Ah, yes, I got that pretty easily, but... Mmhmhm," Anne said, giggling.

Mia gave her a puzzled look.

"What is it? Is there something funny about sickle moon radishes?"

"Oh, no. It's just that my grandma used to chop the side with the leaves off. You know how you'd normally just eat it? She'd put that part in water instead, and the leaves would start growing," Anne said, sharing the knowledge of her grandmother. "I remembered how I'd laugh and call it 'granny wisdom.' I'm sorry, I don't mean to compare it to what you're going to do, but it just reminded me..."

"I-Is that so..." she said, her cheeks twitching from her forced smile.

The fact that her great Empire-saving discovery was actually widely known among commoners came as a terrible shock, and her mind was reeling.

"So, what are you going to do with this radish, anyway?"

"Huh? U-Uh, well, hm... That's a very good question. As a matter of fact... Oh, right! I'm going to steep it in honey!" she declared, recalling the passage in the book that came right after the part about indefinite propagation.

"In honey? Does that taste good?"

"I don't know if it tastes good, but radishes soaked in moon honey collected by moonbees are apparently a remedy for colds, so I figured I'd try making some..."

Honey-soaked radishes were arguably also a product of that pool of knowledge commonly referred to as granny wisdom, but anyway...

"Milady..." For a long second, Anne stared straight into Mia's eyes. Then her expression changed into one of admiration. "I knew it! You're just full of knowledge!"

Judging by the honest awe brimming from Anne's eyes, her grandmother wasn't quite the fountain of wisdom that she appeared to be. With her face successfully saved, Mia turned back to her garden.

"Now, I need to have these seeds planted... Anne, would you happen to know how?"

"Hm, I believe you're supposed to make a hole in the soil with

your finger like this, and...”

Anne crouched down and began poking holes in the soil, dropping some seeds into each one. Mia got down beside her and thrust her finger into the soil as well. For the average noble girl, this would have been an unthinkable act, but Mia the dungeon veteran hardly batted an eye. The sensation of the soil giving way under her finger was strangely pleasant, and she found it rather addictive.

“This is kind of fun, actually. I remember how grandfather used to spend all day poking around in his garden, and I’d wonder what was so great about it...”

Mia’s grandfather, the previous Emperor, through some strange coincidence, shared the same hobby as Rafina: princess roses. Just to be clear, pruning flowers and growing them from scratch were not the same activity. The previous Emperor’s hobby was the proper sort that befit the aristocratic image, trimming and clipping errant branches and petals to maintain the aesthetics of his garden. It was definitely not what Mia was doing right now: digging through soil with her hands like a kid in a sandbox. Mia, however, was oblivious to this difference and, feeling an intimate connection with her grandfather, decided that her delight was something that simply ran in the blood. After a thoroughly enjoyable experience of seed planting, she realized something and frowned.

“By the way, Anne, where are the princess roses? If I’m not mistaken, the seeds we’ve been planting are all herbs.”

“Ah, right. As a matter of fact, it’s apparently really hard to grow that flower from seeds, so I brought this...”

Anne walked to the edge of the garden and brought back a flowerpot that had been sitting there.

“I was told that we should start by trying to get this to flower.”

A small flowerless seedling was poking out from the top of the flowerpot. Glossy leaves adorned a thick, green stem that looked ready to support some new buds.

“If we take good care of it, it’s supposed to flower in about a year.”

“I see. How should we go about taking care of it, then?”

“We have to make sure it gets the right amount of water. Also, it apparently attracts bugs, so we have to watch out for that.”

“That’s it? Why, that sounds like a cinch!”

Watering it every day was a very simple task, and if bugs came

to eat it, she could just move it into her room. That way, the bugs wouldn't be able to get to it anymore.

"I'll bring us some water then."

Mia watched Anne run off to the water station before picking up the potted princess rose.

"Hehehe, this is going to solve all my tea party problems... Easy-peasy."

Cradling the seedling like it was treasure, she looked it over, admiring how strong the stem looked, how lustrous the leaves were, and how the tip of one leaf seemed to be missing...

"My, what's this...?"

Mia had completely misunderstood the meaning of Anne's statement. When she heard it attracts bugs, she'd thought butterflies would be flocking to it for a sip of its nectar or something. She didn't know that oily leaves like these attracted not mature butterflies or moths, but their young — caterpillars. When she idly flipped one of the leaves over and came face to face with a plump little crawler curled up in a ball, her whole body froze. She watched it wriggle, the motion slow and alien and utterly revolting. Then, without warning, it crawled onto her slender finger and, with that awful undulating motion, began making its way up her hand.

"Eeeek!"

The soft skin of her arm immediately broke out into goosebumps.

"Eeeeeek! Ahhhhh! Ah! Ah! S-Someone! A-A-Anne! Yes! Anne! It's time for you to show your loyalty! G-G-Get this bug off me! Eeeeek! It's coming up! It's coming up my arm! Anne! Help me! Anne!"

She was on the verge of tears, but no matter how much she yelled, Anne would not come. Then, an awful realization dawned on her: Anne just went to get water, and the water station was at the back of the building! There was no way she'd hear!

"Eeeeeeek! Anne! Anne!"

Unperturbed by the desperate screams of its host, the caterpillar continued to calmly wriggle up her arm. As Mia watched its bulbous head inch ever closer, she suddenly felt very light, and the whole world spun on its axis before fading away.

"I heard there are flowers that eat bugs," said Mia all of a sudden. A few days had passed since she'd fainted in the garden.

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. Apparently, when bugs come for its nectar, it just gobbles them up! Like this!” She made a motion with her hands. “If I plant some of those behind the princess roses, maybe they’ll eat all the bugs for me?”

“But milady, if it’s bugs you’re worried about, I can just—”

“No, Anne. That’s an awful task and I refuse to have you do it!”

“Milady...”

Anne looked at her with gratitude, moved by the benevolence of her kind master.

I don’t want to make Anne do anything disgusting. Plus, I can’t have her serving me with hands that touched yucky bugs like those. Ugh, just the thought is creeping me out... If one of them happened to be stuck on her clothes, and she brought it in with her, and it ended up on my bed... Eeeeek!

Her imagination quickly spiralled out of control and became the stuff of nightmares. Fueled by the terrifying thought of creepy crawlies invading her private space, she immediately went to the school library to research carnivorous plants. Once she found the one she wanted, she went looking for the seeds. They were quite rare, but she successfully obtained them after spending some money. What followed, however...

“Did you see the flowers Her Highness is growing?”

“I did! They’re so creepy! Apparently, they eat any bugs that go near them... Such dreadful things.”

...Was a great deal of infamy. Furthermore, her honey radish experiment also ended up being surprisingly effective against the common cold, which caused an explosion of rumors suggesting that she was actually a witch of some sort. Just when it seemed likely that the Mia Chronicles were about to end with a burning stake instead of a guillotine, a single statement from Rafina put an end to the nonsense.

“It’s well-known that the southern kingdoms are home to carnivorous plants, and sickle moon radish steeped in honey is a folk remedy that’s been used for generations. As always, the breadth of Princess Mia’s knowledge never fails to impress me.”

In the end, Mia managed to survive the entire affair in one piece, save for a slight dent in her reputation; under the shadow of moonless nights within the bedchambers of gossipy students, there remained continued whispers of Great Sages and granny wisdom.

Regardless, Mia's herbalism skill went up by one point, and that's what matters! Yay!

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by Nozomu Mochitsuki

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